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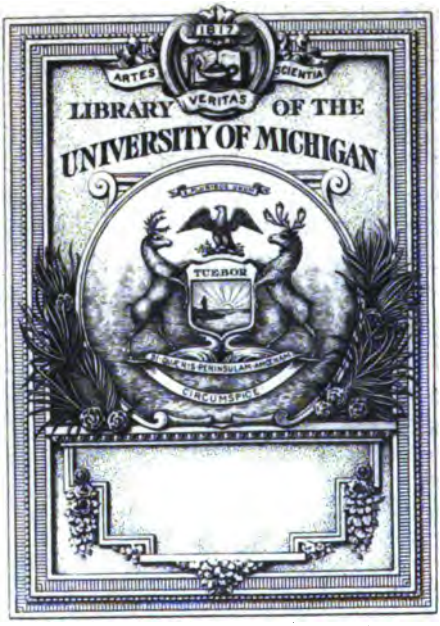

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ORMA FITCH BUTLER, PH.D., '07
PROFESSOR OF LATIN

THE SOUL OF SUSAN YELLAM

HORACE ANNESLEY VACHELL

By HORACE ANNESLEY VACHELL

NOVELS

SOME HAPPENINGS
FISHPINGLE
THE TRIUMPH OF TIM
SPRAGGE'S CANYON
QUINNEYS'
LOOT
BLINDS DOWN
JOHN VERNEY
THE OTHER SIDE

PLAYS

QUINNEYS'
SEARCHLIGHTS
JELF'S

GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY
NEW YORK

THE SOUL OF SUSAN YELLAM

BY

HORACE ANNESLEY VACHELL

Author of "Some Happenings," "Quinneys'," "Blinds Down," "Loot," etc.

NEW YORK

GEORGE H. DORAN COMPANY

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TO THE MEMORY OF

MY SON

RICHARD TANFIELD VACHELL

CAPTAIN, FIFTH FUSILIERS

O. F. BUTLER
BELFAST
4-VII-40

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
I	MOTHER AND SON	11
II	FANCY BROOMFIELD	27
III	INTRODUCING MRS. MUCKLOW	42
IV	LE PAYS DU TENDRE	57
V	UNCLE	70
VI	FIRST IMPRESSIONS	86
VII	SECOND IMPRESSIONS	101
VIII	RECRUITING	116
IX	PARSON'S METHODS	130
X	FANCY'S ORDEAL	144
XI	THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS	160
XII	THE EMPTY PEW	174
XIII	FANCY CONSULTS THE CARDS	190
XIV	HYMENEAL	203
XV	LEANNESS OF SOUL	217
XVI	SAINT WILLUM	234
XVII	FOOL-WISDOM	248
XVIII	MISSING!	263
XIX	SUSPENSE	279
XX	THE TRAVELLER RETURNS	294

THE SOUL OF SUSAN YELLAM

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CHAPTER I

MOTHER AND SON

THE village church at Nether-Applewhite has been described as an interesting chapter in ecclesiastical architecture. It stands a little apart from the cottages upon a hill which presents something of the appearance of a tumulus. Part of the church is Norman, but to the uninstructed the outside has been mellowed by time and weather into a charming homogeneity. It was embellished early in the eighteenth century by the addition of a brick tower. The inside is likely to challenge even the uncritical eye. The transept is as long as the nave, and two large galleries arrest attention in the west end. Overlooking the chancel is the Squire's pew, a sort of royal opera-box, provided with chairs, a table, and a fireplace, not to mention a private entrance. Opposite to this, across the chancel, stands a three-decker pulpit of seventeenth-century woodwork, with a fine hexagonal canopy. On the north side of the steps to the chancel is a mutilated fifteenth-century screen.

Squire and parson can see every member of the congregation.

There are large pews in nave and transept occupied by the gentry and farmers, and many small pews which—although the seats in the church are spoken of as "free"—have been used habitually by certain cottagers. One of these pews in the nave was known as the Yellam pew. Sunday after Sunday, rain or shine, Susan Yellam sat bolt upright in her pew. Her son, Alfred, sat beside her. Mother and son were never guilty of missing a response, or of looking behind them, or of failing to contribute something in copper to the offertory-plate. If a stranger happened to be conducting the service, and if he was so lost to a sense of duty as to display unseemly haste, Mrs. Yellam's voice might be heard, loud and clear, setting the proper pace. At the end of every prayer, her "Amen" came to be accepted, even by the young and thoughtless, as a grace and benediction. Always she wore decent black, as became a woman who had buried—in the churchyard outside—a husband and three children. But her Easter bonnet had a touch of mauve in it.

Her clothes were not the least part of a tremendous personality. Children believed that she went to bed in her black gown. Authority exuded from every pore of her skin. Probably Boadicea was cast in just such a generous mould. She possessed, as will be seen presently, that British cocksureness which so endears us to foreigners. Her particular views upon religion, politics, ethics and agriculture (she tended her own garden admirably)—views constantly aired for the benefit of her neighbours—had become indurated by use. They had stood, as she informed all and sundry, the test of time and experience. The Parson, Mr. Hamlin, observed of her that she was temperamentally incapable of detect-

ing the defects of her great qualities. She supported Squire and Parson in all that they said or did, and after the gracious lady of the manor was the most respected woman in Nether-Applewhite.

Upon a certain Sunday in June, 1914, Susan Yellam sat as usual in her pew. Across the aisle, higher up, sat the Squire's servants, and behind them the Parson's three maids. Before the service began, Mrs. Yellam noticed that one of the maids was a stranger and not country-bred. The girl flaunted no finery, but the cut of her modest skirt and jacket proclaimed her urban. Mrs. Yellam guessed that this was Mr. Hamlin's new parlour-maid from Old Sarum. She might be described as pretty, but "peaky" and "spindling." The Squire preached eugenics, in and out of season, and upon the subject of young females as potential mothers Mrs. Yellam saw eye to eye with that genial autocrat. However, she consoled herself with the reflection that Nether-Applewhite air and good plain food would accomplish a much needed change. She hoped that the girl would not smirk or giggle if old Captain Davenant read the lessons, an infallible test in propriety for strangers. And she wondered vaguely what Alfred would think of her. For a season, Alfred had "walked out" with this young woman's predecessor, a bouncing, red-cheeked lass of the village. Nothing had come of such perambulations. Alfred was what the French term "un célebataire endurci." And he was made extremely comfortable at home. But he had passed his thirtieth year, and of late his mother had hinted discreetly that her cottage, larger than most, could accommodate three persons—or more.

Her thoughts were distracted from the new parlour-maid by the arrival of the Squire and his party. All

eyes in the church were concentrated upon the Squire's only son, Lionel, who brought with him his young wife, Joyce, the daughter of Mr. Hamlin. Mrs. Yellam knew that this had been a love-match, brought to a happy issue against opposition. It was known, also, that Master Lionel had left his regiment, the Rifle Brigade, and was installed as his sire's land agent. Tongues had wagged freely concerning a young soldier's competence for such a position. But Mrs. Yellam had firm faith in the lords of the soil. Master Lionel, in her opinion, had done the real right thing, both in his choice of a wife and of a calling. Perhaps to her the call of the land sounded a more clarion note than any other.

Mr. Hamlin and the choir filed in. The congregation rose. In the days of Mr. Hamlin's predecessor, nobody budged from his comfortable seat when the parson bustled out of the vestry. Mr. Hamlin had changed all that. He put down billing and cooing in the galleries, and the sucking of peppermints. At first he was regarded with hostile eyes as an innovator, but gradually it became known that he had restored forms and ceremonies which presented definite meaning to the instructed. Villagers love forms and ceremonies when they are discreetly led to understand them.

Old Captain Davenant read the lessons, and the new parlourmaid emerged triumphant from the ordeal. Mrs. Yellam noticed, too, that she joined in the responses, and sang the hymns in a modestly restrained, clear, musical voice. Later, she listened attentively to the sermon. So far, so good. At the same time, it became obvious to the mother that her son, even more than herself, was impressed by the deportment and behaviour of this pretty stranger. During the psalms Alfred's eyes strayed too

often across the narrow aisle, and at sounds of a soft, beguiling voice he opened his mouth and left it open for a significant space of time.

After church, Mrs. Yellam walked home by herself, exchanging sober greetings with her neighbours. Alfred lingered in the churchyard, as was his custom, because, being a carrier, he captured a little extra trade thereby. Also, although a confirmed bachelor, he liked to bandy pleasantries with the women, young and old, who were indeed his principal customers.

Mrs. Yellam, having curtsied respectfully to the Squire and his lady, moved majestically along the village street. As she passed the baker's a savoury odour of baked meats assailed her nostrils. It is said that smell affects the memory potently. So long as she could remember, Susan Yellam had connected this smell of baked meat with Divine Service. As a child she had fetched her Sunday dinner from the grandfather of the present baker, and, always, as a reward, her mother had given her a large lollipop. After she married, her Sunday dinner was cooked for her in the same oven and carried to her cottage by a small maid, who, then and there, received and consumed an immense bull's-eye. And it seemed to Mrs. Yellam a very fitting and proper thing that on Sunday the flesh should be as adequately nourished as the spirit. Invariably, also, on passing the baker's, she experienced a mournful pleasure in recalling her late husband's remarkable appetite. Alfred, as a trencherman, was no degenerate son of such a sire.

When she reached the bend of the road, which skirts the placid Avon, she saw her cottage and smiled pleasantly. It was thatched, and on that account beloved by elderly spinsters who drew in water-colour, and frowned

upon by sanitary inspectors. The thatch, a masterpiece of craftsmanship, surmounted whitewashed walls held together by stout oak beams black as the Ace of Spades. Generations of Yellams had lived and died in this cottage. Some might have lived longer—so said the sanitary inspectors—if the Avon, inconsiderate stream, had never overflowed its banks, making thereby an island of the cottage and its garden.

She entered her house, and walked into the parlour, rarely used. Upon a round table near the window was an immense family Bible. Mrs. Yellam placed her prayer-book beside it, and turned to go into the kitchen, which served as a living-room for herself and her son. Suddenly she paused, went back to the table, and opened the Bible. It had belonged to Alfred's great-grandfather. Upon a fly-leaf were many names and dates—births, marriages and deaths. Her eyes lingered upon Alfred's name.

Alfred Habakkuk Yellam, born November 19th, 1883.

Alfred's father had objected to the name Habakkuk. But Alfred's mother had her way. A favourite brother had been so christened.

She closed the Book. Yes; it was fully time that Alfred should marry. She wondered what name would be inscribed beside his.

At the kitchen door she found waiting a small Hebe carrying a beef-steak pudding in a basin done up in a white napkin. Mrs. Yellam took the pudding from the child, placed it in the oven, after removing the napkin, and said wonderingly:

"Whatever be you waiting for?"

Hebe grinned. Young children love old jokes. Mrs. Yellam took from a shelf a large green bottle, shook it,

and produced the expected bull's-eye. Hebe opened wide her mouth. Mrs. Yellam popped in the sweet. Hebe raced away to her own dinner. Mrs. Yellam, holding the bottle in her hand, stood still for a minute, watching the diminutive, diminishing figure till it was lost to sight. Then she turned and contemplated her garden smiling beneath a June sun. The midsummer heat still held deliciously the freshness of spring. The pervasive charm of the glorious month was at its highest pitch. And this stout, red-cheeked woman, nearing her sixtieth year, was subtly conscious of this, although incapable of putting thoughts into words. But dominating her sense of the beauty of things there remained an even more immeasurable satisfaction common to all women when they survey their belongings, great or small, a fundamental pride in possession which Tory statesmen, denying the vote to these supermen, have failed to take into wise account. Women are basically conservative, even the humblest of them They cling to property, to tradition; they love the deep lanes, the very ruts along which they move; they clutch to their bosoms all that is truly theirs, beginning, of course, with their own children.

At this moment, the Squire of the parish, Sir Geoffrey Pomfret, happened to be surveying his domain as seen from his own front door. And he had less reason behind a pride in great possession than Susan Yellam, inasmuch as his broad acres were an inheritance. Every vegetable and flower in the Yellam garden had been planted and tended by the proprietress. They were perfect in her eyes because of this. She had precisely the same feeling about Alfred, her son, whom she perceived leisurely approaching the comfortable home that she had made for him.

She went indoors and busied herself with preparations for the most substantial meal of the week.

Alfred quickened his pace as he approached the small stable which held his two serviceable horses and the van which plied regularly between Nether-Applewhite and Old Sarum. He, too, on entering the stable, paused to survey his possessions, but not with the same complacency which might have been seen upon his mother's face. Alfred loved his horses, and his roomy van balked dearer to him than he would have cared to admit, certainly as dear as the full-length Reynolds portrait in the dining-room of Pomfret Court was to the Squire. Both Sir Geoffrey and he knew that portrait and van must be sacrificed upon the altar of necessity. Sir Geoffrey needed twenty thousand pounds to reduce a crippling mortgage; Alfred, if he intended to keep and improve a good business, must advance with the times to the rattle of a motor. And, of late, whenever his mind had grappled with this insistent problem, he had noticed that the old van creaked more than usual, as if in protest.

Alfred fed his horses, patted their shining necks, and went into the cottage to "clean up." Splashing mightily, he smelt the beef-and-kidney pudding. Five minutes afterwards, Mrs. Yellam said grace. Mother and son ate in silence till the meal was nearly over. Then Mrs. Yellam asked a question:

"What be the name, Alferd, o' the new maid over to Vicarage?"

"Fancy Broomfield."

"Fancy! Wherever did she come by such a finical name as that?"

"I don't know, Mother."

Mrs. Yellam continued, in a slightly aggressive tone:

"I never was one to hold with queer onChristian names. It's silly, too, to call girls by names o' flowers. Look at Lily Pavey!"

"I never do," affirmed Alfred.

"Dark-complected, and no better than she should be. An' that there Rose Mucklow—! More like a gert carrot, seemin'ly."

Alfred, having enjoyed "advantages," did not use the dialect of Wiltshire, seldom heard now except from the elderly villagers. As became a carrier accustomed to pick his way through country lanes, he seldom argued with his mother, partly because he knew that her tongue was sharper than his, partly, also, because he travelled, mentally, along lines of less resistance. On this occasion, he said curtly:

"I like Fancy."

"The name or the maid?" asked his mother quickly.

"Both. The name seems to match the maid."

"Why, Alferd, whatever do 'ee know about her?"

"I brought her from Salisbury. A rare talker; she sat beside me, she did, and talked free and pleasant, as—as a throstle sings."

His mother eyed him sharply. Alfred, as a rule, disdained flowers of speech. She proceeded more warily:

"If so be as you know all about her, let's hear what's to tell. I'll say this, she behaves herself in church."

This commendation loosened Alfred's tongue, as was intended. Very leisurely, between immense mouthfuls of bread and cheese, he told an artless tale. Fancy, it appeared, was the youngest daughter of a small farrier in Salisbury, and the first of three daughters to take service. Her father enjoyed poor health. At this Mrs. Yellam sniffed. She held strong opinions, like the Squire,

upon eugenics. If put to it, she might have admitted that ill-health was apportioned by Providence to the less deserving. Dissenters, in her experience, suffered more from mysterious ailments than Church-people. Draughty, jerry-built Chapels were handicraft of Satan. Alfred continued. Fancy had chosen a country place, because she was none too robust.

"Peaky and spindlin'," remarked Mrs. Yellam. "Is her mother alive?"

"The pore soul gave up the ghost when Fancy was born."

"That's very bad, Alferd."

Alfred, no pessimist, answered cheerfully:

"Might have been worse, Mother."

"Eh?"

Alfred grinned.

"She might have died before Fancy was born, and then there'd be one pretty maid the less in Nether-Apple-white to-day."

"Gracious! She do seem to find favour with 'ee. 'Tis wicked to wager money on't, but I'll lay a pound o' good butter, Alferd, that you disremember Mr. Hamlin's text this marning."

"You'd win that bet, Mother. I'm bothered and moithered to death."

"About this white-faced maid, Alferd?"

"About my old van. About the horses, too. I'm far-seeing, Mother. Get that from you, I reckon. Yesterday, in Salisbury, I did take upon myself the very hateful job of looking at a motor-'bus."

Mrs. Yellam sighed. Fancy flew out of her capacious mind.

"What be us coming to, Alferd!"

"I don't know. But I'm always one to make a guess. My son, maybe, 'll be a carrier, like his father and granfer before him; likely as not he'll want to sell the motor-'bus and buy a flying-machine. We all march on and on."

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!"

Mrs. Yellam gazed mournfully at her son. As a Christian soldier she believed devoutly in "marching on," but such marching implied a leisurely procession, not excess speed. She hated motors, because they rushed by, covering the foot-passengers with dust or mud according to the season. She had, too, an inchoate aversion to all machinery, because it minimised and mocked at human labour, which she respected inordinately. Machinery had driven able-bodied men overseas to return no more. She had seen certain cunning handicrafts wither and die. For instance, how many thatchers were left? Machinery, so she believed, had raised the cost of living; machinery—the ubiquitous locomotive—linked together disastrously town and country, filling the minds of maids with what she called "flummery" and covering their bodies with cheap finery. Machinery, had you probed her heart to its depths, manufactured free thought, and everything else that lured God-fearing persons from the old ways. It was, indeed, hateful to think of her Alfred driving a motor-'bus.

She exclaimed impulsively:

"Alferd, don't 'ee sell the horses and van."

Alfred scratched his head, looking sheepishly at his mother. He understood her very well, and shared most of her cut-and-dried opinions, cherishing even her admonitions. All his life he had had good reason to respect and admire her sterling common sense, less rare

amongst Arcadians than is generally supposed. He replied uneasily:

"That means losing good business, Mother. Folks want more and more nowadays, and they want it in a hurry."

"Leave well alone, Alferd."

"Suppose well can't be left alone? I ain't one to complain; I'm grateful to the Lord for His blessings, but if another likely young feller started a motor-'bus, he'd down-scramble me."

"I allow you knows best about that."

She sighed again. He could see that she was profoundly affected. He went on very slowly, thinking as he spoke:

"And there's others. . . . You rub it well into me that this cottage'd hold more than a man and his mother. If I bring the others here, I must think of them. I'd like to do handsomely by them as come after us. Mother," his voice trembled a little, "it's more to me than you think for, but the old van must go. Our folk won't stay homealong. I'll do a big business carrying people instead of parcels."

Mrs. Yellam rose.

"If you give me they others, Alferd, I'll put up with this wondersome change. God's ways be our ways, if we look humbly into 'em. I did hear tell t'other day of a motor-hearse. Don't 'ee carry me to my grave in one!"

Alfred solemnly reassured her, and began to fill his pipe.

As a rule, he took a Sunday nap after dinner, whilst his mother was washing up. At three, he would stroll along the village street, combining business with pleas-

ure, picking up gossip and booking orders for the coming week. Later, he might walk in the park with a companion, not always of the opposite sex. He liked a wit-sharpening talk with a man, sensible, perhaps, that his own wits had not too sharp an edge to them. The women of the village were unanimous in pronouncing him a true Yellam. All the men of his family were good to look on—stoutly-built fellows, broad-sterned and broad-shouldered, slow of speech and movement, slow, too, to wrath, patient under adversity and modest under prosperity, solid and stolid, kind to animals and children, and racy of the soil.

Upon this particular Sunday, Alfred took the high-road earlier than usual. Fate, rather than inclination, directed his steps towards the Vicarage. For the moment his van and a pair of horses filled his mind. Back of these lay a pleasant wish to pass the time of day with Fancy Broomfield. No doubt she was feeling very homesick. He wondered what she would have to say upon the subject of motor-'buses. He divined in her a vein of sentiment, which appealed to him the more strongly because it was absent in the red-cheeked, bouncing girl whom he had considered, temporarily, as a future wife. From her he had escaped—thank the Lord!

Alfred reached the village in five minutes. It was a source of pride to his mother and himself that their cottage was isolated. Such isolation carried with it a certain distinction, an immunity from derisive comment upon the Monday's washing, and the shrill voices of scolding wives, and the howling of babies. The Yellams' cottage always smelled sweet. There were no neighbours to pop in at unseasonable hours to borrow unconsidered trifles which they had no intention of returning.

Nether-Applewhite was regarded by the Squire as a model village, delightfully old-fashioned in appearance but brought up-to-date by a judicious expenditure of time and money. The passing traveller admired the width of the main street which meandered north and south, following the course of the Avon. Some of the cottages had been built in the sixteenth century, or, possibly, at an even earlier date. Some were, as obviously, modern, but not, on that account, unpleasing to the more critical, for harmony had been aimed at and achieved. The high note—*la note qui chante*—was the curious thatching of the roofs, some of them miracles of cunning craftsmanship. The tiny gardens blazed with colour, because the lady of the manor loved flowers and bestowed handsome prizes, each year, upon the most successful of many competitors. Stocks, red-hot-pokers, larkspur, polyanthus, peonies and dahlias caught the eye which was lured back to the humbler beauties of mignonette, forget-me-not, love-in-idleness, and a generous profusion of roses.

Few villagers were abroad, but Alfred Yellam bagged a brace of orders and exchanged banter with half-a-dozen young men loafing near the main bridge across the Avon. Amongst these happened to be a soldier, looking very smart in a kilt and white spats. Soldiers were not too highly esteemed in Nether-Applewhite. This particular specimen was the son of a notorious poacher, and till now regarded by the fathers of the hamlet as a ne'er-do-well. To-day, he carried himself handsomely, turning a bold, bronzed face upon all beholders. He spoke civilly to Alfred and enquired after his mother. He had just come back from India with his regiment, and was entertaining an appreciative audience

with Eastern tales spiced like the breezes that blow from Ceylon.

Alfred listened to him, marvelling at the change in the man. Presently, he essayed a mild jest:

"You were a rare runner after the petticoats, Harry, but I never thought you'd live to wear 'em."

Bucolic laughter greeted this sally. Harry laughed as gaily as the others.

"You may come to it, Alfred Yellam, if what I hear tell of comes true."

"And whatever might that be, Harry?"

"War, Alfred, war such as you fellers never dreamed of."

"What a tale!"

Harry surveyed the group critically:

"A bit o' drill'd make men o' some of 'ee." He broke into a lusty barrack-room ditty—

"It's One—Two—ten times a day,
And now that you 'ave got it,
Don't yer give it away—!
ONE—TWO—ten times a day,
When I was in the timid, orkard squad, boys."

Alfred said solemnly:

"I ain't one to deny that wars may come. And you were always a good fighter, Harry, but we are men o' peace."

"Ay," said one of the group, "I never did fancy soldierin'."

Alfred said slily:

"William ain't yet forgiven a Hampshire redcoat who walked out and off, by Golly! with his girl."

Having fired this shot, Alfred walked on. In his mind he turned over the thought of war, such a war as he, indeed, had never dreamed of in maddest nightmare. And the words and tune of the barrack-room ditty echoed through the cells of his brain. He wondered vaguely whether he could stick such dire discipline—ten times a day. Wouldn't he up and smite the sergeant to mother earth with his big fists, which clenched themselves at the mere thought of such a treadmill? Then he reflected comfortably that England's fleet sailed gloriously between him and such a possibility. The Squire belonged to the blue-water school. So did the Parson. Alfred muttered to himself:

"They talk that way because they know no better, pore souls!"

A carrier had other things to worry about.

Approaching the Vicarage by the back way, he heard a woman's voice. He stood still. Tender modulations fluttered, like doves of peace, out of the pantry window. Alfred smiled.

"'Tis she, the pretty dear! Talks and sings just like a throstle."

CHAPTER II

FANCY BROOMFIELD

FANCY Broomfield left Salisbury for Nether-Applewhite with a heavy heart not hidden by a pathetic smile. Possibly Alfred Yellam had a glimpse of unshed tears, when she took her place beside him in his van. And his ears may have caught a poignant note of distress quavering now and again beneath her prattle. Country folk are observant, although they keep their observations to themselves. Fancy had been happy at home. When she took a place in Salisbury, in the time-honoured Cathedral Close, she saw her people frequently. As she moved farther from Salisbury, she was grievously conscious of what separation from her father included. The fact that he was failing in health, and therefore in fortune, punctuated her misgivings. Alfred won her confidence with a few curt words about her new place and its master. He did not mention her bouncing predecessor, but he talked of the Parson and his household with the incisive tones of one who knew. What he said was reassuring. Most maidservants approach a new place with justifiable apprehensions concerning the mistress. In this case there was no mistress. Possibly disagreeable fellow-servants may arouse even livelier forebodings. A cook, for example, holds the keys of Heaven and Hell in her hands. Fancy had envisaged an immense cook with a great red face, and a liver swollen

to atrabiliar disproportions. She was pleased to learn that the autocrat of the Parson's kitchen was not much larger than herself and consistently amiable.

"Parson preaches against sour faces," said Alfred. "No yapping and snarling in his house. From your looks, you ain't one to come slummicking in after hours with a silly tale about being took all over queer when out walking."

"My! no," affirmed Fancy.

Alfred digested this in silence. Fancy had already told him much about her family, but she had not mentioned others. Presently, Alfred said abruptly:

"Have you got a young man in Salisbury?"

Fancy laughed for the first time, a silvery trickle of laughter.

"Why should you think I have, Mr. Yellam?"

"It seems to me likely."

"Well, I am fond of one boy. He's too sweet for anything."

"Is he?"

"Yes, I'd like you to meet him. Maybe I'll show you his photograph one fine day. It's in my trunk. He's a sailor-boy, and at sea."

"Ah. At sea, is he? My mother says that a woman is silly to marry a sailor. Why? Because, if you love him, he is always at sea, and if you hate him, he bides at home."

Fancy laughed again.

"Then my boy, after he marries, will be always at sea. How miserable for his wife!"

"It is a fair warning."

"For me, Mr. Yellam?"

"I mean, if you marry your sailor-boy."

"But I can't marry my own dear brother."

And then Alfred laughed, Homerically.

Soon afterwards, he left her and a modest box at the Vicarage. She thanked him demurely, asking how much she owed him. Alfred was tempted to demand a kiss in payment, but a glance at a virginal face restrained him. He said, "One shilling, please, miss," and she slipped the coin into his ample palm, adding: "It's a new one. That brings luck, don't it?" Alfred indulged in no speculations on this point, but when he found himself alone, he examined the loose change in his pocket, and picking out a new shilling, transferred it to another pocket, wondering furtively if he were making a fool of himself. He whistled gaily as he drove on.

Fancy was shown to a small room, which pleased her immensely, because no other maid shared it with her. From a casemented window, she could see the park of Pomfret Court, with its clumps of fine trees and its herds of dappled deer. She felt that she would be happy in such a quiet place. The room was very simply but comfortably furnished, spotlessly clean and fresh. She admired the wall-paper, white with small sprigs of pink roses on it. What a lucky girl to have such a nice room! And, approaching the Vicarage, she had fallen in love with the many-gabled house standing amongst beeches, a warm-looking house of time-mellowed brick, built substantially, happily situated below the church and just above the village. As she was unpacking, the housemaid, Molly, brought her a cup of tea. Being her first day, Fancy was not expected to wait at dinner, but Molly told her that after dinner she would be sent for, and that she might expect a five-minute chat with her master.

"Is he masterful?" she asked.

Molly nodded, adding confidentially:

"Such a pair of eyes as never was. Gimlets! It ain't no fun lying to him, and no use either. He can look bang through a pore girl, and tell her what she's had for dinner."

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed Fancy.

"Don't you worry! 'Tis an easy place. No SHE poking and prying about. Only we have to be good girls here, and then we're happy."

"I do hope I shall be happy," said Fancy, adding hastily, "I look such a fright when I ain't."

After dinner she was duly sent for, and found the Parson walking up and down his study. He regarded her austerely, bidding her welcome to his house. Fancy noticed at once the keenness of his glance, and the still more penetrating quality of his voice. First impressions count enormously with sensitive creatures, and young women in Fancy's station of life are not much concerned with shades and gradations. To most of them men are angels or devils, black or white. Fancy had encountered what she called "devils" in Salisbury, rough fellows with Rabelaisian jests upon their thick lips. From such she shrank instinctively. Happily for her, she had met the other sort in and out of the Cathedral Close. Instantly, she acclaimed Mr. Hamlin as angel, a rather terrible angel, such as she imagined Saint Michael to be, pitiless to the wicked, smiting them hip and thigh with a flaming sword. Her second impression, not quite so vivid, was more agreeable. The Parson's clothes were shabby, and his study, which, indeed, reflected truthfully the man's personality, presented a somewhat bleak aspect. It looked a workshop rather than a comfortable room. The

cocoanut matting was worn; plain deal shelves held innumerable cheaply-bound books; pamphlets were piled upon the floor; the chairs, with one exception, were not upholstered. She blushed a little as the thought came to her that she, the new parlourmaid, not yet in working kit, was the smartest object in her master's room.

Mr. Hamlin asked her a few questions. Fancy had good references; she was a Churchwoman; she had been confirmed by Sarum himself. She belonged to the Girls' Friendly Society. Did she like her work? Yes. Mr. Hamlin smiled. For a moment Saint Michael vanished and a less terrifying personage stood in his place.

"I like *my* work," said the Parson incisively. "That is a vital matter. Perhaps it is the most vital matter in the world. Each of us has his or her work, and if we do it gladly it is well with us. You don't look very strong."

"I'm much stronger than I look, sir."

Her soft, deprecating voice brought another smile to the Parson's lips. He said abruptly:

"Good. Women need all their strength and reserves of strength. Your work here will not be too hard. Spare yourself whenever you reasonably can, and so you will serve me and yourself the better. Good-night."

Fancy went away, slightly awed, but feeling much more comfortable. Before going to bed, she wrote a short letter to her father, telling him that she liked her place. She added a postscript: "Mr. Yellam, the carrier, was ever so kind to me."

She slept well in a comfortable bed.

She came to Nether-Applewhite on a Thursday. On the following Sunday, as Alfred Yellam had foreseen, she was feeling homesick, because she had never failed

to see her own people on that day. After luncheon, to hearten herself up, she sang hymns in the pantry.

Her face brightened, when she perceived Alfred at the door of the pantry. After asking her how she fared, and learning that the other maids were "out," he said, in business-like tones:

"Any orders for the carrier?"

Fancy smiled demurely. She was alone in the house. The Parson had a Children's Service at three. She guessed that, as a rule, carriers did not call for orders at such an hour.

"Not as I know of, Mr. Yellam. Do you generally call for orders on Sunday afternoon?"

By this time she had been informed of Alfred's perambulations with her predecessor. It might be an honoured custom in Nether-Applewhite for the carrier to walk out with the Vicarage parlourmaid. Alfred gave a guffaw.

"Well, no; I took a notion to drop in, casual-like, to pass the time of day."

"What would the Vicar say to that?"

"Parson ain't the fearsome man you take him to be. A very human gentleman, always welcome in our house. And I make bold to tell you that I'm heartily welcome in his."

"If that is so," said Fancy, politely, "won't you sit down, Mr. Yellam?"

She indicated a chair into which Alfred bumped massively, with the air of one not to be budged from an impregnable position. Fancy was getting ready some dainty tea-things.

"Expecting company, miss?"

"Yes. Mr. Lionel Pomfret and Mrs. Pomfret. A nice tea. Master's orders."

Alfred nodded. He eyed Fancy with ever-increasing approval. A black gown, with snowy apron, bib, and cap, became her admirably. Beneath the cap her soft brown hair lay in shining ripples; the bib lent extra fulness to a too thin bosom; her big hazel eyes sparkled with animation; her pale cheeks had a tinge of pink in them. Alfred contrasted her delicate features with the exuberant comeliness of the late parlourmaid. Charm was not a word very distinctly defined in his vocabulary. But he became conscious of Fancy's charm, although he would have called it by another name. Certainly she was sweetly pretty, like a rose-leaf which a rough wind might blow away. More than aught else, too, he was struck by her little hands, which moved deftly and swiftly. He made sure that she was a good needlewoman. Such hands could make light pastry. All this pleased him tremendously. Fancy prattled on about the company expected, telling Alfred what he knew already, but he listened in silence, captivated by her voice. She cut dexterously some thin slices of brown bread-and-butter, as she spoke of the love-match between Squire's son and Parson's daughter.

"I am looking forward to waiting on them," she declared.

"Yes—a very handsome, notable couple. Squire'll be a granfer before he knows where he is."

"What things you do say, Mr. Yellam!"

"Ah-h-h! In my common way, I say what I think, never meaning offence, particularly to young maids, but 'tis a fact Sir Geoffrey is fair aching for grandchildren, the more the merrier. 'Twould be terrible if his house

and lands passed to some measly next-of-kin. But we won't think of that."

"No. Not yet, at any rate."

Alfred felt reproved but not disconcerted. It might be politic to change the talk to motor-'buses, so he said abruptly:

"I'm in a fair sweat, Miss Fancy."

"Mercy me! Shall I fetch you a glass of water?"

"Figure of speech, miss. It's like this, if you'll excuse me talking of my own affairs."

"Why, I like that. It's so—so friendly of you, Mr. Yellam."

"I'm standing betwixt the devil and the deep sea."

"Well, I never!"

He gazed so earnestly at Fancy that she wondered if she were the deep sea, and that the devil was an allusion to the late parlourmaid. Alfred continued:

"The world, miss, goes round and round for true lovers, but it don't stand still for anybody, leastways not for carriers. We must push along with the times, eh?"

He glanced at her anxiously. She was quick to perceive that he wanted counsel and much flattered thereby. She eyed him as keenly as he, just now, had eyed her. Being so frail and attenuated herself, his massive form and square head attracted her strangely. She admired his big chin and too heavy nose. And her eyes lingered with appreciation upon the bulging biceps and deltoids shewing strongly beneath his thin summer jacket. What a sad pity that her dear father had not been cast in such a mould! To his anxious question, she replied with a little bob of her head.

"My father and granfer were carriers before me. Van

and horses was good enough for them. And good enough for me, too. It tears me to scrap 'em."

"Scrap them?"

"Ay. When you go back home, how'd it suit you to ride in a motor-'bus?"

"It would be grand," said Fancy.

Alfred rubbed his hands; his red face beamed.

"Dang me, if that don't put the lid on it."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Yellam?"

"I was half hoping you'd say what you did. Yes—it would be grand. A nice 'bus—red and yaller—'d make the neighbours yap a bit. Do you know what they call my old van?"

"It's a nice comfortable van."

"So 'tis. But would-be funny folks call it 'Flash o' Lightnin'.' "

Fancy laughed. Alfred decided that it was a treat to hear her laugh.

"Are you angry with me for laughing?"

"Lord—no! A laugh like yours warms the cockles of my heart. Laugh away, miss. All the same, there's a meaning in what neighbours say. I do move slow, when I've a load. And in winter-time, when roads are heavy, I just crawl along. You're right. A motor-'bus *is* grand. And I can pay cash for one, I can."

He spoke with pride, opening his large hands. Fancy, having finished cutting the bread-and-butter, sat down opposite to Alfred. With some difficulty he mastered the impulse to invite this bird-like creature to perch on his knee. Her air of aloofness both pleased and exasperated him. She sat very still, with her hands folded upon her lap, just as good girls sat in church. Alfred talked with gusto about motor-'buses.

"Can you drive a motor?" asked Fancy, when he paused to mop his forehead with a huge red bandana.

"No, miss. But if I say it as shouldn't, I can do most anything when I try. They'll teach me in Salisbury—free, gratis and for nothing, if I buy the 'bus."

"I do hope you'll be careful, Mr. Yellam."

Alfred was delighted at this mark of solicitude. For the moment nothing more was to be said. He searched his mind for another suitable topic of conversation. Already he had decided to ask Fancy to walk out with him, but he feared a rebuff. It was "up" to him to shew her his paces. Any premature love-making might be disastrous. Nevertheless, it behoved him to waste no time in making himself agreeable. Half-a-dozen likely young fellows would be fluttering about Fancy before the week was out. First come, first served. He essayed a fresh flight:

"Coming through village, miss, I met a soldier—'No Account Harry' we used to call him. Back from the Indies, and spruced up wonderful."

Fancy exhibited lively interest.

"A soldier, Mr. Yellam! I do like soldiers, because—because——" Her voice melted on a silence; her cheeks shewed a deeper pink.

"Do tell, miss. Why do you like—soldiers?"

"You'll think me such a silly."

"Not me. I'm no mumbudgetter. What you tell me I'll keep to myself."

Her eyes dwelt steadily on his. In a lower voice, she asked:

"Do you believe in fortune-telling, Mr. Yellam?"

"I don't know as I do. But I don't know as I don't."

"I do. And—maybe the Vicar wouldn't like this—I can tell fortunes myself with cards."

"Well, I never!"

"Yes. About three months ago, a lady came to Salisbury and lodged near us. She told fortunes with cards; she taught me. She didn't do it for money. Now, if you laugh, I'll never forgive you . . ."

Alfred became portentously solemn.

"The lady told me that I should marry a soldier."

Alfred looked perturbed, but his shrewd sense sustained him.

"Did she? Likely as not she'd seen you walking out with one."

"I have never walked out with a soldier."

Alfred looked unhappy. He thought of the well-set-up Highlander. He beheld Fancy hanging on his arm, gazing upward into a bronzed, devil-may-care face, listening to strange tales of the Orient. Jealousy ravaged him. His dejection deepened when he discovered that his tongue had lost the trick of speech. He yearned to speak lightly and facetiously about soldiers. But he could think of nothing better than this:

"Soldiers are soldiers."

Fancy read him easily. Her father distrusted soldiers, who loved and ran away. He had warned her against their beguilements. But Fancy had read English history, more intelligently than most girls of similar upbringing. She knew what soldiers had done for England. Also, she had eye for a bit of colour. Soldiers appealed to her imagination. She put sailors first, the jolly tars. Tommy came next, with his swagger cane, his jaunty walk, and his cap cocked on one side, shewing a "quiff" beneath.

"Why do men, like you, Mr. Yellam, despise soldiers?"

Alfred wriggled, impaled upon this barbed hook. He had wit enough to realise that serious issues impended. He might easily offend Fancy. And no answer rose pat to his tongue. Why did he despise soldiers? He was too honest to deny the indictment. Yes; he did despise soldiers. He answered stolidly:

"There are soldiers and soldiers. 'Tis sober truth, miss, that the best men in these parts don't enlist. The pay is bad, and the work hard. The wrong 'uns take the shilling only when they're driven to it. It may be different in Salisbury."

"I don't know that it is. I can understand why men like you, Mr. Yellam, don't enlist. Why should you? But that doesn't change my feelings about soldiers. Whatever they may have been, whatever they are, I think of this: At any moment, with their hard work, with their poor pay, they may be called upon to give their lives for—us."

Her soft voice faltered. Perhaps Alfred was already in love. He may have been. When her voice failed, and he beheld her for the first time as a woman of sensibilities, tender for others, pleading for the less fortunate, all that was best in him leaped into being. Nothing but his disability to find words for his thoughts prevented him from avowing his feelings. He realised instantly that here sat the girl for him, the wife he wanted. His experiments in courtship, if you could term it that, confirmed his conviction that he had remained single so long simply because Fancy was waiting for him. She was absolutely right because the others had been as absolutely wrong.

"That's true," he heard himself saying.

Fancy went on in a livelier tone:

"Have you read Kipling, Mr. Yellam?"

"I seem to have heard tell of Mr. Rudyard Kipling in the newspapers."

"I want to tell you what he said about soldiers."

She quoted slowly:

"It's Tommy this, and Tommy that, and Tommy—go away!
But it's—Thank you, Mr. Atkins, when the band begins to play."

Alfred was visibly impressed. He recalled the Highlander's words about war, such a war as he had never dreamed of. What if the band did begin to play? More, it surprised him that Fancy should quote Kipling. Obviously, she had enjoyed educational advantages denied to him. She spoke like the quality. He began to measure the distance between them, conscious of shrinkage in himself. To gain time he repeated her last words:

"When the band begins to play! 'No Account Harry' spoke of that, yes, he did. But war is for kings and potentates, not for us. As I came along river, I says to myself: 'We have peace here, glory be to our noble Fleet!' It gives me a mort of comfort thinking of our mighty ships. And I remember what Parson said not so long ago. 'You working-men,' he says, 'are the backbone of England.' And, by Golly! I stiffened myself accordingly."

Fancy smiled, and said no more. She glanced at the pantry clock. Alfred rose. His face was redder than usual, as he held out his hand. It consoled him mightily to reflect that "No Account Harry," by virtue or vice of an unsavoury record, would hardly dare to stick his tip-tilted nose into the Vicarage.

"So long, Miss Fancy. Would it be called presumption, if I made so bold as to ask you to take the air with me next Sunday? 'Tis wonderful pretty in the Park, and I'd like to shew you the fat bullocks."

Fancy blushed, for he was squeezing her small hand.

"I should like it very much," she replied simply.

Alfred asked for no more, wise man! He had squeezed her hand, and she had not resented it, although her slim fingers lay calm and cool within his ardent clasp. She accompanied him to the back door. In the lapel of his jacket Alfred sported one of his mother's roses. He presented it to Fancy in silence—and fled. As he passed into the park, intending to map out a pilgrimage for the following Sunday, he thought complacently:

"I'm a forcible man. Neighbours say that, and 'tis so. She's a dinky maid, bless her!"

With eager strides he mounted the gentle slope of the long escarpment between Pomfret Vicarage and Pomfret Court, keeping to the right of the main drive. The path he followed meandered through a plantation. Suddenly, he caught a glimpse of a pair of lovers strolling arm in crook, with love in their eyes and laughter on their lips. He recognised Lionel Pomfret and his bride. Alfred plunged into the hazels and let them pass. When the coast was clear he took the path again, skirting the Court and the Home Farm, and, ultimately, debouching upon the downs. Warmed by his walk, he removed his hat and fanned himself with it. Then he sat down and let his eyes wander across the landscape.

How fair it was upon that midsummer's afternoon!

A soft haze slightly obscured the water meadows. Through it he could see the Avon, a silvery riband. In the far distance the finest spire in the world soared into

palely blue skies. The breeze from the land had died down. Presently the breeze from the sea would stir, tremulously, the grasses at his feet. Sheep were grazing hard by. Some of them rested in the shade of the yews which fringed the top of the down. Immediately below him stretched the park. Under the clumps of beeches stood the fallow deer. Beyond were the lawns of Pomfret Court, flanked by ancient elms and oaks and horse-chestnuts. Between the masses of translucent foliage, the façade of the house glowed faintly red as if the sunbeams penetrating the bricks during nearly four hundred years were now radiating from them.

All this to Alfred—and to how many others—was the outward and visible sign of peace, a peace sanctified by time and the labour of countless hands. That such a peace could be imperilled passed the understanding of wiser men than the carrier. Surely it would endure till the end, till eternity.

For ever and ever—Amen!

CHAPTER III

INTRODUCING MRS. MUCKLOW

SUSAN YELLAM rarely left her cottage, and, during week-days, was not too cordial to chance visitors. On Sunday afternoon, however, she was at home to friends, and hospitably glad to offer them the best cup of tea in Nether-Applewhite, and some hot buttered toast which waited for nobody. If a too nice stomach disdained buttered toast, the pangs of hunger could be alleviated with bread and honey (from the hives in the garden) or bread and jam (of Mrs. Yellam's own making). A rich cake was in cut.

Mrs. Yellam had been a Mucklow. And her favourite brother, Habakkuk, had married a Rockley—all of Nether-Applewhite. Mrs. Mucklow generally dropped in on Sunday afternoons, bringing a grievance with her. The Mucklows had not prospered like the Yellams and Rockleys. And this was the more remarkable because the Mucklow men were fine upstanding fellows, reasonably sober, and God-fearing Churchgoers. The ancients of the village affirmed that the brains of the family had been served out in one lump, and given to Susan Yellam.

Upon the Sunday following Alfred's visit to the Vicarage, Mrs. Mucklow, wearing black silk and a bonnet, dropped into the cottage. She was taller than her sister-in-law, and very thin. Invariably she disagreed with ev-

erything said by Mrs. Yellam, and yet, oddly enough, the two women remained friends, partly because Susan believed devoutly in the ties of blood, and partly because Jane's rather fatuous contradictions shed searchlights upon Susan's commonsense. Wisdom is comfortably bolstered by the folly of others.

"Well, Jane, how be you?"

Mrs. Mucklow answered dolorously:

"I be no better than I was las' Sunday."

"That's bad."

"No, it ain't. I expected to be worse. Very soon I shall be lying along o' Mother. She suffered wi' her innards, pore soul, just as I do."

"She got comfort out of it, too, just as you do, dear. Sit you down, and let's hear the news."

Jane Mucklow sighed, and sat down. Unlike her sister-in-law, she strayed daily into the cottages of her neighbours, picking up gossip, and repeating it with embellishments of her own. As she removed white cotton gloves, she said sharply:

"I want your news first, Susan."

"But I haven't any, Jane; nothing, that is to say, which you don't well know already."

"Maybe. But I wanted it from your own lips."

"Bless the woman! Whatever do 'ee want?"

"What you prides yourself on giving—information. Don't sit there so genteel, and pretend to me that you don't know what your Alferd be up to this very minute!"

"I don't—and nor do you."

"Yas, I do. Your Alferd was over to Vicarage las' Sunday. To-day, he's traipsin' the Park with Miss Fancy Broomfield."

From her pronunciation of the name, it was quite evident that the young person in question was not what diplomats call *gratissima* to Mrs. Mucklow. And the sniff that followed was aggressive. Mrs. Yellam poured out a large cup of tea with an impassive face. Inwardly, she winced. Alfred had kept his plans to himself, doing so, moreover, in accordance with advice well rubbed into him ever since he had affairs of his own to attend to. But a mother—and such a mother—might be deemed an exception to a golden rule. Mrs. Yellam said calmly:

"Is he? Who is your Rose walking out wi'?"

The question was ungrammatical and unkind. Rose, large, plain, and red-headed, sighed for swains who did not walk out with her. She might have been comfortably married to Alfred at this minute. The older families in Nether-Applewhite fancied intermarriage, much to the exasperation of Sir George Pomfret. And so far —the stock being exceptionally sound—no great evil had come of this. Within the year Prudence Rockley had married her first cousin. In Mrs. Mucklow's opinion marriages between near of kin were preferable to alliances with outsiders. Town girls, she regarded, not without reason, as hussies.

"My Rose be a good girl, and well you knows it."

"Maybe you have something agen this Fancy Broomfield? If so, Jane, out wi' it."

"Townbred girls be all alike."

Mrs. Yellam replied tranquilly:

"I bain't an upholder o' they, but I keep faith in my Alferd's good sense and judgment. He's walked out wi' a baker's dozen o' maids afore this 'un, and why not? I've allers told Alferd to pick an' choose."

Mrs. Mucklow attacked the buttered toast almost viciously.

" 'Tis true, I suppose, that his father's van ain't good enough for *your* son?"

Inwardly Mrs. Yellam winced again. Alfred had made his decision "on his own." But she answered as tranquilly as before:

"Seemin'ly it ain't. God A'mighty knows what us be coming to, and He don't tell. As a Christian woman I bows afore Him."

Poor Mrs. Mucklow, continually contrasting the prosperity of Alfred with the ill-luck, as she deemed it, of her own three sons, sniffed again. Not long since the three Mucklows had contemplated emigration to Canada. They had been anchored in Nether-Applewhite by Mr. Fishpingle, sometime butler to Sir Geoffrey, now bailiff at the Home Farm. They happened to pursue avocations such as hurdling, spar-making, hedging and ditching, which were precariously dependent upon a demand that varied tremendously, a demand that, year by year, shewed inexorable signs of failing. And Mrs. Mucklow was uneasily conscious that her sons' ill luck was regarded by her sister-in-law as part of a Divine dispensation. In the same complacent spirit the good-luck of Alfred became, in Susan Yellam's eyes, a mark of Divine favour. It may be imagined how this rankled in the heart of a woman who held herself to be as good a Christian as her neighbours, and perhaps better. Mrs. Mucklow retorted tartly:

"You be allers shovin' your Christian feelin's down our throats, Susan. But I say this—you ain't been tried as I hev."

Mrs. Yellam dealt with this drastically.

"I be thankful for God's mercies. I might be less thankful if so be as I mixed up my victuals as you do. Faith in A'mighty God have more to do wi' the stomach than most folks think on. As for being tried—I tend four graves in churchyard to your one."

Mrs. Mucklow's small beady eyes softened.

"Yas—you've had your sore trials, Susan. And the graves be a credit to 'ee. But I've said it afore, and I say it again, small fam'lies make for righteousness. Keepin' my childern in shoe-leather alone took a deal o' saintliness out o' me. Be that cake?"

"I hopes so. Have a slice?"

"Your rich cake allers lies heavy on my pore stomach, but 'twould be ungenteel to refuse."

Mrs. Yellam cut a large slice. As Mrs. Mucklow consumed it, Mrs. Yellam said impressively:

"I'll tell 'ee something, Jane, as betwixt us two. I ain't one to brag unduly, and 'tis true that I be proud o' my Christian feelings. For why? Because, long ago, I come mighty near to losing 'em."

Mrs. Mucklow gasped; a piece of cake stuck in her throat.

"I never did! Come near to losin' 'em, did 'ee?"

"Yas." Mrs. Yellam's voice became solemn. "When I buried my pore husband . . ."

"That was a rare funeral, Susan. Squire and my lady there, flowers from the Hall, a very moving set-out. Was I interrupting of 'ee?"

"You was, Jane, but never mind. As I laid my husband to rest, I says to myself: 'The Lard gave and the Lard ha' taken away.' "

"Very proper."

"The pore man suffered so bad with rheumatics that

it seemed God's mercy to take 'un. He'd no pleasure in life onless he were talking of his aches and pains. And allers the misery o' telling me what he'd like to eat an' drink—and couldn't. That fair tore him, and me. He was a rare doer, like Alferd. When he was taken, I did not rebel."

Mrs. Mucklow was so interested that she suspended operations with the cake, awaiting the climax of an astounding tale, arrested by a strange expression upon her sister-in-law's face. The pupils of Mrs. Yellam's eyes seemed to contract; her lips became set. She continued very impressively:

"When my children died, 'twas different. Seemed to me like as if I was buryin' part o' myself. 'Twere bad enough when the two boys went, but when Lizzie sickened, my own lil' maid, why then, Jane, I did rebel."

"And no wonder!"

"I watched her slippin' away, and I says, 'No more churchgoin'.' "

Mrs. Mucklow repeated the words:

"No more churchgoing—! That, from you? I be shaken to my beam ends."

Mrs. Yellam went on, in the same cold, incisive voice:

"We be told, Jane, that the Lard chastens him whom He loves, but we read elsewhere in the holy Book that He chastises them as He hates. When Lizzie died I'd the blasphemeous notion that God A'mighty hated me. And then my faith went a-flutterin' out o' winder. I lay in bed two Sundays, because I dassn't go into my pew. I never spoke to nobody. Yas—I lay abed, fighting Satan. He tempted me rarely."

Mrs. Mucklow nodded.

"Ah-h-h! You be tellin' a wondersome tale, Susan.

Satan nearly had me, near as no matter, when I was a maid. He came gallivantin' along in a red coat . . ."

"A soldier?"

"No, a fox-hunting young gentleman. 'Tis a subject I don't care to think about. How did Satan tempt you, Susan?"

"Wi' a brandy-bottle. It stood there makin' eyes at me . . ."

"For all the world like my young gentleman."

"What saved you, Jane?"

"I dunno'. It might ha' been God A'mighty's grace. It might ha' been fear o' consequences.'

"Them two things saved me, Jane. But I calls it one thing. God A'mighty's grace made both on us think o' consequences. I says to myself: 'What will Alferd do if his mother don't go churchalong? What'll happen to him, if his mother be known as a drunkard?' And, there and then, Jane, my pore faith come a-flutterin' back, a-shaking its feathers, like a hen after a storm o' rain. And the storm was over, too. It's been warm and sunny for me ever since. Now you know why I be proud o' my Christian feelings."

Mrs. Mucklow nodded and finished her cake. She had begun her second cup of tea, when steps were heard upon the stone flags which led from the front wicket to the back door.

" 'Tis Alferd," said Mrs. Yellam.

"And Miss Fancy Broomfield," added Jane Mucklow. "Come to ask your blessing, Susan."

"Fiddle!" replied Mrs. Yellam sharply.

Within a minute, however, it became plain that Alfred wanted nothing more exciting than a cup of tea for himself and his companion. They had climbed to the top

of the down, after visiting Mr. Fishpingle at the Home Farm. Miss Broomfield, formally presented to the elder women and as formally received, looked pale and tired. Possibly, she divined hostility the more penetrating because suppressed. Mrs. Yellam said magnificently:

"Please excuse me for welcoming you, Miss Broomfield, in my kitchen."

Fancy smiled.

"What a pretty kitchen!"

The kitchen—as Mrs. Yellam was complacently aware—deserved the adjective. It boasted, what is never found in modern cottages, an open hearth and ingle-nook. Hams and flitches of bacon were smoked in the wide chimney. After such treatment, the hams were hung in a row from a big black beam. By the side of the hearth stood a small stove large enough to bake modest joints. The window, with diamond-paned casements, was deeply recessed, with a red-cushioned seat running round it. The dresser, opposite to the hearth, exhibited pewter and some willow-pattern pottery. Upon the oak panelling on each side of the hearth hung gleaming brass, including an immense warming-pan. The table in the middle of the room had been stoutly built of deal. Removing the table-cloth, you would have seen a surface scrubbed white as the linen cloth. Along the window-sill were pots of geraniums. Even Mrs. Mucklow admitted that Queen Mary could eat her dinner off the red tiles of the floor.

Mrs. Yellam nodded. Alfred brought a chair for Fancy, but she declared her intention of sitting upon one of two stools against the wall.

To her amazement, Alfred said sharply:

"Don't sit on that!"

"Why ever not, Mr. Yellam?"

"'Tis a coffin stool."

Fancy sat down upon the chair he placed for her. Mrs. Mucklow said mournfully:

"I wonders, Susan, why you keep they stools in your kitchen."

"And so do I," added Alfred.

Mrs. Yellam answered simply:

"They mind me, Alferd, that in the midst o' life we be wise to think, now and again, o' death. Will you remove your hat, Miss Broomfield?"

Fancy did so, slipping off her gloves first. Mrs. Yellam frightened her a little. Not quite at ease, she minded her table manners, and behaved with a gentility quietly noted and silently commended by the elder women. On such occasions, when a stranger happened to be present, Mrs. Yellam loved to lead the talk, choosing a subject likely to improve the minds of her listeners. The captious may regard this as an unpleasing trait. Mrs. Yellam believed that it was more blessed to give than to receive instruction. But, listening to Parson or Squire, she imbibed such wisdom as fell from their august lips with an attention and an intelligence which she exacted from others when she held the floor. Her first duty, as hostess, was to see that her guest made a good tea, the sort of tea, obviously, that she did not get at home. Fancy, however, trifled with her food, being overtired, and positively refused to eat cake. Mrs. Yellam said majestically:

"My son tells me that you be a reader, Miss Broomfield."

"I like books," replied Fancy. "I have not read many, Mrs. Yellam."

"I don't hold wi' reading," observed Mrs. Mucklow; "leastways, not for pore folks as has no time to waste."

This was a sly thrust at Susan Yellam, one of the few villagers who took in and read a halfpenny paper.

"Nor do I, Jane, for such as you means. Parson says you find in a book just what you bring to 'un. There's folks in Nether-Applewhite as brings nothing, nothing at all."

Mrs. Mucklow helped herself to a second slice of cake. Alfred lit his pipe, hoping that Fancy would stand her ground when his mother opened fire. Mrs. Yellam smiled graciously at her guest. She might be "spindling," but she looked intelligent. Nevertheless, she distrusted intelligence in very young women. Undisciplined, it might turn a modest maid into a militant suffragette. From all such, Good Lord, deliver us! A Nether-Applewhite girl, at the head of her class in school, had joined the Salvation Army, and now banged a tambourine in Southampton. Sometimes she wondered whether her own Lizzie mightn't have turned out a handful. Such a possibility almost resigned her to the loss of a child very precocious and with a strong will of her own. You will understand the temperament and character of Susan Yellam better if you grasp the fact that she endeavoured, habitually, to explain the mysterious workings of Providence both to herself and to her neighbours. She had been a devoted wife and mother, but, marking as she did the disconcerting changes in young women of her acquaintance, she was forced to the conclusion that many mothers profited by losing their prayers. God Almighty knew best. She addressed Fancy again:

"You live in Salisbury?"

"I do, Mrs. Yellam."

"My son tells me that there be many radicals in the town."

"I daresay."

"Be you true blue or yaller?"

"I don't quite understand."

"Be you Conservative or Radical?"

"My father is a Liberal."

Alfred looked uneasy. As a carrier, seeking business where he could find it, and dealing impartially with all, he eschewed politics, and deprecated the discussion of controversial themes. He would have been amazed had a stranger informed him that his outlook on life was panoramic in comparison with his mother's. Coming to the rescue of Fancy, he said encouragingly:

"So is Mr. Hamlin. He ain't the worse parson for that. As Mother knows."

Mrs. Yellam nodded. A slight acerbity informed her voice as she answered her son:

"Mr. Hamlin be a good man in parish, Alferd. 'Tis a square sound peg in a square hole. And I say this for 'un. He don't talk politics wi' me."

Mrs. Mucklow interpolated slily:

"Ah-h-h! Parson be a wise man too."

Mrs. Yellam ignored this superbly. She looked at Alfred, but her remarks were addressed to Fancy.

"We all knows that Mr. Hamlin is Radical, and 'tis a sore point wi' Squire and many others. I hold wi' the old ways, I do. I've no patience wi' mischief-makers, a-settin' class agen class, stirrin' up strife, and a-puttin' beggars on horseback. As for they jumped-up folks, sanding their sugar yesterday an' to-day peacocking along pretending to be quality, I fair hates the sight o' 'em. I wouldn't let a maid o' mine take service wi' such.

All this talk about equality be foolish and contrary to Scrupture. There be gentle, and simple, rich and pore. And I takes it that pore means more nor poverty—pore o' purse, pore o' mind, pore o' body. . . ."

"And poor of soul," said Fancy.

Mrs. Yellam turned sharply. But there was no offence in the girl's quiet voice. She lay back in her chair, listening attentively, obviously interested. Mrs. Yellam nodded.

"And pore o' soul. You don't look, Miss Broomfield, as if you was ashamed o' service."

"I ain't," said Fancy.

"And I reckons you hold wi' me that folks should rest content in their proper station o' life, eh?"

Fancy answered politely:

"I heard a sermon preached on that in our cathedral."

"Did 'ee now?"

"Yes. Till I heard that sermon, Mrs. Yellam, I was never quite able to understand about doing my duty in that state of life unto which it should please God to call me."

"'Tis plain as plain to me," said Mrs. Yellam.

Fancy hesitated. She desired to please Alfred's mother. She was quick to realise how easily she might displease her. Being innately sincere, she continued bravely:

"It seemed to me to be wrong not to want to better oneself, to rise higher . . ."

As she paused, at a loss for words, Mrs. Mucklow interrupted with a hard laugh.

"Right or wrong, we all feels that way. Susan Yellam don't fancy motors, but she'd like to ride in her carriage an' pair, and would too, if so be as a convict uncle from Australia left her a fortin'."

Alfred said uneasily:

"Now, Aunt Jane, you know we ain't got convict uncles t'other side of the world. What will Miss Broomfield be thinking of us?"

To his astonishment and delight Fancy, not his mother, answered Mrs. Mucklow.

"But that is what the preacher made so plain and comfortsome. He said that we were not to be content with the station to which we might be born, but content in that unto which God might call us. He might call us to a higher position, or to a lower. He might give carriages and horses, or take them away."

Her gentle voice, so persuasive, so sincere, carried with it an extraordinary conviction. This simple explanation of a text familiar to anybody who has learnt the Catechism became instantly adequate.

Mrs. Yellam, quite as sincere as Fancy, said quickly:

"'Tis true. I never thought on't just that way. And 'tis fair, too. Let God's Will be done, whate'er betide." Her face brightened. She said almost joyously: "I shall ride in Alferd's new motor-'bus wi' proper pride now, feeling sure that God A'mighty called me to do so."

Alfred beamed. Fancy, he perceived, had "made a hit." It might be prudent to take her away, and run no risks. If he and she resumed their walk, the elder women would discuss her handsomely. A favourable first impression might become indelible. He got up:

"If you feel good and ready, Miss Broomfield, we might take the road again."

"She be tired out," declared Mrs. Yellam. "Anybody but a man'd see that. You let Miss Broomfield bide along wi' us, Alferd; she can bide so long as she's a mind to."

This was disconcerting both for Alfred and Fancy. Happily for them, Mrs. Mucklow espied an opening for contradiction. She exclaimed derisively:

"What a notion, askin' a young maid to bide along wi' two old women, when every bird i' the trees is a-singing to his mate. But 'tis true, Miss Broomfield be leg-weary, after climbing our hills. Take her down river, Alferd. Do 'ee borrow the miller's boat."

"That I will," said Alfred. "And glad he'll be to oblige me, too. Come on, miss. 'Tis only a step to the mill."

The pair vanished. The elder women looked at each other.

Mrs. Mucklow said slowly:

"I be flambergasted, Susan."

"So be I."

"A very pretty, modest maid."

"Alferd might do worse; I allows that."

"So do I, Susan."

Mrs. Yellam hesitated, and then said slowly:

"Alferd be fair daffy about her, that's a fact. Miffed as I may well be at his choosin' a sweetheart who looks, seemin'ly, as if a puff o' wind'd blow her bang out o' parish, I sticks to what I says, the boy might ha' done worse."

"Boy, indeed! He be a man."

"'Tis true. And the multiplication-table, one might say, be made for him rather than her. Alfred did tell me las' night that an auntie, on her mother's side, bore twins twice. But as to that, we women be all in God A'mighty's hands."

"Then Alferd have told 'ee as he wants her?"

"Don't 'ee repeat it. He have."

"Then he'll get her. A big strong feller like that feels wonnerful cuddlesome when he comes acrost they delicate, abstemious females. 'Tis as sartain as we be sitting here that he'll put the question in his own good time."

Mrs. Yellam sighed.

"We be on the skirts o' great happenings. If 'tis the Lard's Will, I have nothing to say."

CHAPTER IV

LE PAYS DU TENDRE

DURING the month that followed, Fancy was very happy. Time stands still for true lovers. Past and future seem immensely remote; the present, with its rosy hours, holds captive the happy prisoners. Alfred, it is true, had not yet put his fate to more than the touch. He had encircled a slender waist with a reassuringly strong arm—no more. Being a Yellam and a carrier, he disdained haste. Fancy was well content to stroll arm in crook towards the altar. Indeed, upon more than one occasion she had checked Alfred when about to explode into speech. Behind this procrastination lay a maiden's quickening sense of the passion she had provoked. Men whom she regarded as "devils" had accused her of being prim and cold. She happened to be neither, but it delighted her to think that she inspired restraint in her lover, that he treated her with a delicacy less rare in big strong men than is generally supposed. His dry humour appealed to her, and the rude Doric of this remote Wiltshire village brought many a smile to lips that grew redder as kissing-time drew near. As yet Alfred had not kissed her, although he had kissed the *others* many times. She gleaned this information from her fellow-maids, who were very sympathetic and, apparently, more impatient for a satisfactory consummation than the protagonists themselves.

Meanwhile, Alfred was learning how to drive a motor, and becoming acquainted, very slowly but surely, with the "insides" of the great beast. Already he regarded it as human, and of the same sex as Fancy. He would say:

"She was ramping and roaring yesterday afternoon and spitting black smoke at me. But when I coax her, she purrs sweet as any pussy-cat."

Lively chaff was exchanged between the lovers upon fortunes told by real ladies, which turned out wrong. Fancy, however, still pinned her faith to an old pack of cards in her possession, and to appease her Alfred began to speak of himself as a soldier. When Fancy confided this to Molly, she said maliciously: "Soldier, eh? Well, he ain't one o' the 'onward' sort, is he?" Fancy divined that Alfred would speak when the motor-'bus was delivered; and there were moments when she asked herself anxiously which of the two "hers" he loved the better.

Toward the end of July, her mind was set at rest upon this point. After the first walk to the downs, Alfred discovered that Fancy tired easily, although her alert little mind remained active and indefatigable. His own brains moved slowly; frequently he was unable to follow the maid's divagations and speculations. For example, he had asked her soberly what she intended to mean by the expression a "poor soul," an expression used by him in an entirely different sense.

"You came nigh upsetting Mother," he told her. "Dang me, if she didn't think 'twas a biff at her."

"I meant a lean soul."

"Whatever may that be, dear?"

Always, when these problems presented themselves for

solution, Fancy would hesitate and blush a little, which hugely delighted Alfred, who set himself the pleasant task of framing questions during his drives to and from Salisbury to be answered on the next Sunday.

Having taken time to collect her powers of speech, Fancy said solemnly:

"Some rich people as well as poor have lean souls."

"Rich people? Do you know any rich people?"

"No, but David says so."

"David? You don't mean David Mucklow? He's a pore soul, sure enough."

"I was speaking of King David, who wrote the Psalms. When people's bodies wax fat with riches, their souls grow lean."

Alfred nodded, feeling slightly uncomfortable. He weighed an honest fifteen stone.

"Ah-h-h! They wax so fat that they stick in the Narrer Gate?"

"Yes; I suppose so."

Alfred considered this, frowning. Then his face brightened.

"I see you slipping through that Gate like a lozenge."

"Oh, please don't say that! 'Tis a figure of speech, Mr. Yellam. Thin people may have lean souls. I sometimes think that my soul is lean, when I lie awake thinking of—of——"

"Of what, dear?"

"Of myself, and what I want for myself."

"What do you want?"

"Lots and lots of things."

She evaded further questions, arousing a keener curiosity. Her elusiveness frightened him. He couldn't understand anybody lying awake after an honest day's

toil. He tried to picture her lying sleepless, with her luminous eyes gazing into the darkness. Did she think of him? Did she really want him as he wanted her? The mere thought of her frail little body aroused a strange reverence. His mother was right. A puff of wind would blow her out of parish, blow her out of sight, blow her bang through the Narrow Gate. And feeling this, with the stabbing, ever-recurring reflection that she was the least fleshly of mortal women whom he knew, he would not willingly have added half a cubit to her stature or half a pound to her weight. In his eyes, she was just right.

Upon a never-to-be-forgotten Sunday, much rain had fallen. Fancy, who, like most servants, wore too thin shoes, perpetrated a mild joke:

"'Twill be dryer on the river than on land, Alfred."

For some time they had called each other by their Christian names.

"You're right, Fancy."

The motor-'bus, gloriously red-and-yellow, shining like a sunset, had been brought homealong the night before. Alfred shewed it to Fancy, expatiating upon its superlative merits and beauties till Fancy's jealousy was kindled afresh. Oddly enough, urban though the girl was and advanced in her ideas, she felt as Mrs. Yellam did about machinery. Whirring wheels and roarings and rampings aroused queer qualms in her. Alfred took out the heavy silver watch which had belonged to his father, and balanced it on the radiator. Then he proceeded to "race" the engine, although he had been advised not to do so. The watch never quivered, but Fancy did. She put her hands to her small ears, and ejaculated:

"O-h-h!"

"What's the matter?"

When the engine was purring gently, Fancy confessed that noise upset her. Pistols, for example, discharged suddenly in places of entertainment, made her jump. Alfred said derisively:

"What a rare wife for a soldier!"

"I thought 'twas going to explode, yes, I did."

"Not she. 'Tis a beautiful 'bus, and, maybe, she'll carry me and mine"—he glanced at her now pensive face—"to fame and fortune."

With this hope animating his heart and voice, Alfred spoke at length, and with impressive deliberation, mapping out a golden future. Already he had made arrangements to transport passengers to Salisbury, likely boys and girls anxious to attend the High School. He predicted an ever-increasing traffic and the almost immediate necessity of running two 'buses and engaging an assistant.

"Maybe such a job would suit a young woman I know, Miss Fancy Broomfield."

Fancy hastened to assure him that such ambitions soared high above her disabilities. Alfred continued, waxing very eloquent, letting loose amazing phrases, setting forth prospects which must please and allure his listener, talking at her so persistently that Fancy became frightened.

"Alfred," she said, entreatingly, "don't make so sure of things."

"'Tis in my hand."

"I mind poor Father's plans, and that makes me nervous when you race on so."

"What about his plans?"

"He'd a nice business, shoeing the carriage horses of

the quality. He never did fancy rough work. But it went to bits, when motoring came in. That lay back of his poor health. We never know what'll happen."

"I say we do. God Almighty helps them as helps themselves. I'm helping myself to a large spoonful, but I can down it, and more too."

Undeterred and undismayed by her protestations, he rushed on gaily, as if driving his 'bus at excess speed. To Fancy he seemed to be whirling out of sight altogether. Nevertheless she guessed that this nerve-racking, soul-jolting excursion into the future was presented as a joy-ride for her.

"If you ain't careful," she warned him, "you'll fetch up in Buckingham Palace."

At this derisive quip, he jammed on brakes, regaining her sympathy with the grim remark:

"Or in a ditch. You're right, my girl. 'Tis a fool as toots his own horn. Let's say good-bye to the old van."

The van stood derelict at the back of the shed; the stout horses had been sold at a fair price. Alfred locked up the door of the shed and glanced dubiously at the grey skies. The afternoon promised fine weather, but the grass in the park was sopping. Being a true Yellam, Alfred had made elaborate plans; he had chosen the spot where he meant to propose, a bosky nook in one of the smaller plantations, hard by a tiny stream, where ferns grew luxuriantly. In this sanctuary Fancy might be persuaded to take off her hat and gloves. Then, after due preliminaries, the man would have his way with the maid. He felt full of poetry, and quite incapable of expressing it.

"Wet as water it be underfoot," he growled.

And then Fancy made her small joke. Alfred jumped at the suggestion. Twenty minutes later, they were floating upon the quiet bosom of the Avon, where the river widened above the mill.

"Perfectly lovely," murmured Fancy.

Alfred nodded, with a heart too full for speech. The sight of his red face amused the maid. She knew well enough what was simmering beneath a too stolid exterior. He pulled up-stream with short, jerky strokes, effective but not elegant. His jacket lay across Fancy's knees, a protection against splashings. White shirt-sleeves bulged with big muscles. They were heading for a small willow-covered eyot, really—as Alfred reflected—a more secluded spot than the bosky dell. He could push the boat through the reeds and bulrushes and find snug harbourage under the willows.

He did so.

Secure from prying eyes, they sat together, side by side, at the bottom of the boat. Alfred slipped an arm round Fancy's waist, and pressed her to him. He wondered whether she would remain cool and calm, when the burning question was asked. With huge satisfaction he noticed that her bosom just heaved beneath her thin blouse. On this blouse rested a tiny gold locket which held the portrait of her sailor brother. Alfred had never seen this locket palpitate before. His own heart thumped almost indecorously at the sight. Stealing a glance at her face, he saw that she was blushing. The silence was so delicious that he hated to break it—and didn't. Certain carefully-prepared phrases whirled out of his mind.

"My!" exclaimed Fancy.

"What is it, dear?"

"A big water-rat!"

"So 'tis. I don't blame him for wishing to have a look at you."

The rat behaved charmingly, peering down at them from the bank, ready to dive into his hole, if the trespassers upon his domain moved.

"He ain't afraid," said Alfred; "but I am."

Fancy said hastily:

"Don't move! What bright eyes he has, to be sure."

"No brighter than others I know."

"Shush-h-h! There! He's gone. I wanted to see him stroke his whiskers. I wonder whether he be a gentleman rat or a lady rat?"

This happy remark provided a new opening. Alfred said with authority:

"He's a buck rat. He didn't feel frightened, but I reckon he'd told his missis and the little 'uns that he'd just take a squint at a notable couple, and come back. I'll wager a new hat, he's telling 'em a fine tale."

"For all you know he may be an old bachelor."

"Ah! Rats are wiser than we. And Nature is kinder to them. 'Tis no big business for them to get to housekeeping. When they're good and ready, they go at it —slam bang."

"Yes. Animals don't want much."

Alfred pressed her a little closer.

"Take off hat and gloves, Fancy."

"Why?"

" 'Tis a notion I have."

She smiled faintly, and obeyed. Alfred eyed the hat, a simple affair, home-made. The gloves were of white silkette. Everything she wore seemed to be part of herself, dainty, ephemeral, easily crushed and soiled.

"Put your dear head on my shoulder. 'Twill be more cosy."

She hesitated, and did so. Her palely-pink cheek lay close to his lips. He said solemnly:

"I mind what you said, Fancy, about lying awake nights, wanting lots and lots of things. Tell me about the things you want."

"I c-c-can't."

Her voice had sunk to an attenuated whisper. He realised that she was trembling, and his own pulses throbbed with hers. He continued, more fluently, pressing her tighter to him:

"Are you wanting grand things?"

"Oh, no. Whatever made you think so?"

"Because, dear, there is something grand about you. It mazes me, when I think on't in my everyday way. You're Parson's parlourmaid, thank the Lord! and I'm a plain carrier, with no book-learning and rough manners. 'Tis like this, Fancy. I'm of the earth, and you're a lil' angel. 'Twouldn't surprise me to find wings growing on your dear back."

He touched her back gently, to make sure. It was satisfactory to find that wings, as yet, had not sprouted.

"I'm only a silly girl, Alfred."

He repeated obstinately:

"You're grand. I reckon 'tis your soul which comes nigh to busting your dinky body. Now, Fancy, what do you think about, nights?"

Direct in all things, it never occurred to Alfred that a modest girl might shrink from answering such a question in the sincere spirit which put it. She smiled sweetly:

"When we talked about that, Alfred, I was thinking amongst other things of . . ."

"Yes, dear?"

"That hat." She pointed a slim finger at it. "I wanted that hat ever so, because I saw one very like it on the pretty head of Mrs. Lionel Pomfret. I wrote a long letter to Father, telling him where to buy the straw and the trimmings. You like it, don't you?"

"I never saw a prettier hat, but I like best the head as bobs under it."

"It cost me four-and-eight; not a penny more."

"Wonderful you be with your needle. Go on, Fancy. I reckon that hats ain't all you think about."

"I think about Willie, tossing in his great ship."

A consuming envy of Willie, the sailor brother, assailed Alfred, but no suitable phrase occurred to him. Fancy continued:

"Most of the time, Alfred, my thoughts are with poor Father. He does miss me."

"I'll be bound he does."

"He enjoys such miserable health. He's a real farrier, doctors horses as well as shoes 'em. And he takes his own medicine. I used to water it down, unbeknown to him."

"Horse medicine? That's moving stuff. Looks as if your thoughts, dear, never rambled far from the family."

"Oh, yes, they do. I think a lot, Alfred, about the future."

This was more encouraging.

"So do I; so do I."

"If anything happened to Father or Willie, where would I be?"

Alfred replied happily:

"I don't know where you would be, but I can tell you where you might be."

His eager voice beguiled her, but she resisted its pleading.

"I might be almost alone in the world. My two sisters are married. They live in small houses. There wouldn't be room for me. I like this place, but, oh, dear! some places be awful. It's selfish to think of myself, but I can't help it."

" 'Tis a heartsome thing to think about. I think about you, Fancy, when I drive slow along our roads. You fill my mind, you do."

He hoped fervently that she would say what he wanted and confess outright that she let some of her thoughts dwell on him. But again the poor fellow was grievously disappointed. She murmured confusedly:

"How funny!"

"Funny be damned!"

"Alfred——!"

"I don't care. I'm moved as if I'd taken your father's horse medicine. You're raking me up with a small tooth-comb. If I think of you all the time, 'twould seem fair that you'd think of me some of the time."

"Perhaps I do."

"Ah-h-h! That's better. We're coming to grips."

As if contradicting this, the aggravating witch raised her head. Alfred grew desperate. Had he been browsing in a fool's paradise? The thought palsied speech. He spoke angrily:

"I see how 'tis. You lie awake shaking with laughter, thinking what I fool I am."

"Gracious! If you talk like that, I shall think so."

"I am a fool about you. 'Tis a fact. I ain't ashamed on't."

"Folks say . . ." She hesitated; her eyes twinkled demurely, but he couldn't see them.

"Well, what do folks say?"

"That you're a oner with girls, on and off like."

"On and off? You're throwing big Eliza at my head. If I was a true soldier man, always bragging about my victorious marches with women, I might tell you 'twas t'other way about. Being only a timorsome carrier, and a lover of God Almighty's truth, I say this. Eliza scairt the gizzard out of me, she did. I fair ran away from her audacious, ungenteel attacks. Now you have it."

Fancy laughed. Alfred fumed on, beside himself with love and impatience.

"I've walked out with many maids, some not so maidenly as might be. I'm a picker and chooser, getting that much sense from my mother. I never walked long with any of 'em. If you'd happened along fifteen years ago, when the first petticoat hit me in eye, I'd have remained true and faithful to you—so help me God!"

She remained silent, twisting her fingers. He said hoarsely:

"I want you desperately for my wife, Fancy Broomfield. And you know it, being a clever maid. Now—don't you want me?"

He felt her body relaxing, almost slipping from him. Then, very slowly, she lifted her eyes to his, and he read in their luminous depths the blessed answer which her quivering lips withheld.

He kissed her reverently and tenderly.

To his surprise and delight, she kissed him, clinging to him, and whispering pantingly:

"You'll be kind to me, Alfred; I know you will. I'm such a poor wife for the likes of you. Your mother thinks so, and your Aunt Jane."

"You can twist them round your lil' finger."

"I believe you love your motor-'bus more than me."

"What a notion! Now I'm going to kiss such foolishness out of you. If it ain't gone when I've given you the first big dose, why, I must begin all over again."

The river lapped its approval against the sides of the old boat. A sedge warbler looked on with his tiny head on one side. The tall reeds nodded. The sun peeped from behind a cloud and shot a golden shaft upon the pair. Why do we think of the orbéd maiden, the Moon, as being kinder to lovers than the great god of day, which warms and fructifies? Upon this artless pair he poured generously his vivifying beams. Suddenly the willows sparkled with diamonds, the grey river became a sheet of silver, the sedge warbler fluted his hymeneal note, and other warblers joined in the chorus.

And, far away, in a great palace, men were bending frowning brows over a vast war-map, gesticulating fiercely, plotting and planning Armageddon.

But the lovers had their hour.

CHAPTER V

UNCLE

EVERYBODY in Nether-Applewhite called Habakkuk Mucklow Uncle.

In all villages remote from what we call civilisation there may be found men like him, loose-limbed, loose-tongued, easy, pleasure-loving, quick-witted in what concerns others, strangely slow to grapple with their own opportunities, always at the mercy of their wives and genially dependent upon them. Uncle was the best thatcher in the countryside. He might have been busy all the time, but it was known that he refused disdainfully the more primitive forms of his work; he never touched barns or stacks. On the other hand, he was artistically eager to tackle the decorative thatching which is still to be found in Wiltshire. Although he was older than his sister, Mrs. Yellam, and past sixty, he still ran afoot with the hounds, and earned handsome tips as an independent harbourer of deer. During many years, also, he had been "beater" to old Captain Davenant, who took out a Forest License from the Crown which afforded him three days' rough shooting a week, from October till the end of January. Nobody, in those parts, knew the northern half of the New Forest better than Habakkuk Mucklow.

Like all his family, he was an upstanding fellow, a six-footer, and finely proportioned, with a cheerful red

face, cleanly-shaven save for a wisp of grey whisker which he sported high on his cheek after the fashion adopted by the Iron Duke, whom Habakkuk venerated as the greatest of Englishmen. Had you told him that his hero came from Ireland, he would not have believed it.

Uncle loved creature comforts, and could carry more strong ale without showing it than any man in the parish. Very wisely he had married Jane Rockley who, in her time, had served a long apprenticeship at Pomfret Court as scullery-maid and then kitchen-maid, becoming, finally, cook in that handsome establishment. Jane Mucklow ruled Habakkuk through his stomach, and he was well aware of this, and rebelled constantly against what he considered to be an abuse of power.

"Womenfolk," he would remark, "don't wage honourable warfare. They hits below the belt, they do. When my old 'ooman gets miffed wi' me, I notices a tremenjous difference in my victuals."

Uncle had pipeclay in his marrow. During his hot youth he had taken the Queen's shilling after a poaching affair, and served some five years with the colours of the county regiment. He had not seen active service, but he allowed strangers to believe that he was a great warrior. Possibly, the discipline of the parade ground had made him swear to take life easily for the rest of his days.

Captain Davenant spoke of him as a "character." The word "card" was not known in Nether-Applewhite.

Uncle loved two persons nearly as much as himself—his sister, Susan, and his nephew, Alfred. When the news of Alfred's engagement became known to him, he expressed great interest and pleasure, drinking the health of prospective groom and bride in much ale and cider.

Alfred brought the blushing Fancy to Uncle's cottage, and received the felicitations which the good looks of the young woman warranted.

Uncle had sentimental views about the married state not shared by his wife. As he kissed Fancy, he said solemnly:

"'Tis a great venture. We all likes a dip into the lucky bag. And it do seem to me, Alferd, as you've pulled a prize."

Mrs. Mucklow sniffed. She, too, kissed Fancy, but uttered a warning note:

"Marriage ain't what some folks crack it up to be, my girl. But I've not a word agen courtship. Your uncle, as is to be, follered me about like a dog for three years, and I own up truthful 'twas the happiest time o' my life."

Uncle laughed cheerily.

"I be your old dog still, Jane, and allers ready for a bone."

Mrs. Mucklow nodded, looking whimsically at Fancy.

"You hear that, my girl? 'Tis the bone they look for. A man's heart lies in his stomach. Feed up Alferd so long as he behaves himself. I says nothing about the power o' prayer, seein' as generally speaking my most powerful prayers ain't been answered as I could wish, but fasting do wonnerful work, especially wi' men."

Uncle laughed again.

Marriage, however, seemed reasonably remote. Fancy wished to "make good" in her new place. Alfred, very comfortable at home, intended to work hard for a year at least, laying the solid foundations of a business likely to be bigger than he had ever dreamed it to be. Mrs.

Yellam, moreover, had spoken plainly and sensibly to her son.

"She be a sweet maid, Alferd, but tarribly spindlin', a slip o' muslin, and young for her years."

"Twenty-two, Mother."

"I knows that. And I minds that her mother died, pore soul, when Fancy was born. A bottle-baby; and I never did hold wi' that. Don't 'ee look so glum. She be plumper a'ready. Pa'son give his maids good plain food, and our air blowing over downs be better nor strong ale for such as she."

"You do love her, Mother?"

"In course I do, and I'm doing my duty by her and you when I tells 'ee that she ain't marriage-ripe, nor likely to be for many months to come. If I was only thinking o' myself, my son, I'd be laying out your wedding sheets this day. Squire and me has many things in common, and this afore all: we likes to see red-cheeked little 'uns coming on."

"You're a wonderful, farseeing woman. Fair aching I am for her, the pretty dear, but wait we must for matrimonial joys, and wait we shall. That's certain."

To his surprise, she laid her strong hands upon his shoulder and kissed him solemnly: demonstrations rare indeed with her, which provoked surprise.

"Why, Mother!"

She said slowly:

"You be all I have, Alferd, and a son to be proud of as never was. I be farseein'. 'Tis a gift o' God. Biding for happiness, in the right Christian spirit, generally brings it, but not allers, not allers."

With a sigh she turned to her daily work, and he went, thoughtfully, to his.

July glided away peacefully. Wars and rumours of wars reached few ears in Nether-Applewhite. The possibility of civil war in Ireland disturbed Mr. Hamlin and provoked to wrath Sir Geoffrey Pomfret; the villagers remained blandly indifferent to anything outside the sphere of their own interests and activities.

With the one exception of Uncle.

Perhaps that old war-horse—for so he deemed himself to be—nosed from afar the coming battles. More than likely, he picked up chance words dropped by Captain Davenant, once a Guardsman, who rented two miles of fishing on the Avon, preserves under Uncle's watchful eye. The Captain predicted war with Germany as inevitable. Uncle, like his wife, could be trusted to repeat what he heard with sundry additions peculiarly his own. In the ale-house, he told his cronies what he knew and much more.

"'Twill be a nice bloody how-dy-do; and it mads me to think that time, as the saying goes, have laid me by the heels. The Kayser be bent on the job, and have been ever since they ancient days, which I recalls right well, when he licked the Frenchies. A rare doin' he give 'em, to be sure."

An old gaffer answered promptly, voicing, unwittingly, the general opinion:

"'Tain't none of our affair. I be sick to my stomach wi' such flustratious talk. We English be the mightiest people on earth because we minds our own business. I don't think nothing o' foreigners; they be, one and all, so wonderful peevish."

Uncle smiled genially.

"Minds our own business, do us? I bain't so cocky-sure o' that, old friend. Speaking up for myself, and

bigger fools have spoken in this ale-house, I be sartain sure that good money comes my way through minding other folks' business. I was never one to think of myself."

"What a tale!"

"The Captain be a dry old stick, but cracklin' wi' ripe wisdom, as I be. And he's seen the world, as I have. Stay-at-home folk never look further than their backyards. I takes a very wide view. Me and Lord Roberts have sized up this yere Kayser for what he be, a very bumptious, slambang, bold pirate, a Grab-all as must be put in his place by we. And why? Because 'tis our duty and privilege to keep proper order. We had to down Krooger." He trolled out lustily:

Good old Krooger's dead.
He cut 'is throat
Wi' a piece o' soap.
Good old Krooger's dead."

"I'll drink one more glass o' ale afore I go homealong. Yes, my respectable, church-goin' friends, we be on the eve o' such battles as never was. And I couldn't hold up head amongst proper men, if I thought old England'd keep out o' the scrap. I practises what I preaches. I've three big sons—fair whoppers. If wanted, I'll see to it that they be amongst the first to go, and wi' all my honest, generous soul I wish I could go along wi' en."

The publican, William Saint, who served the ale, said sharply:

"Your sons, Uncle, may have something to say about that."

Uncle stared at him disdainfully. William Saint was

of Nether-Applewhite, but he had begun a prosperous career as a footman at Pomfret Court. Uncle despised lackeys in his heart. And he detested what he termed "quality talk" from people who were not quality. William Saint spoke mincingly, which indicated cant and prosperity. He was accused, not without reason, of holding radical views, although, being a time-server, he voted Conservative in accordance with the Squire's wishes. Nevertheless, Saint was not a man to be ignored or taken lightly. His tavern, the *Sir John Barleycorn*, did not engross all his activities. He had many small irons in the fire, bought and sold horses, dealt in corn and hay, and farmed a few acres of land. In appearance, he somewhat resembled Napoleon: the same massive jaw, the thin lips, the pale complexion and brooding brow. Under his management a small ale-house was becoming a rival of the principal inn, the *Pomfret Arms*. He catered for a better class of customer than his predecessor. And he saw possibilities in a tavern, happily situated in the middle of the village, overlooking the Avon, a comfortable house of call, clean outwardly and within, heavily-thatched, picturesque enough to catch the eye and beguile the fancy of the ubiquitous motorist.

Uncle drank his ale before he answered Saint. The mighty draught restored his good-humour.

"May be. I listens to all men, and suffers fools and knaves as gladly as King Solomon. The Kayser be spoiling for a big fight wi' we. You be on the side o' peace, William Saint, and there's many to keep 'ee company. I don't blame 'ee. 'Tis your ignorance. The country be full o' just such men as you, wi' their eyes glued to their own tills, and counters, mindin' their own business, pore souls! and puffed up wi' conceit." He

paused and concluded impressively: "We be tee-totally unprepared, and there be millions over yonder a-waiting and a-longing to stick us like so many fat hogs. I wish 'ee, one and all, good-night."

Uncle cocked his bowler—a genuine Billy Coke hat, with Lock's historical name on a much-soiled lining (the bowler had belonged to Captain Davenant)—at a martial angle, and strode to his cottage, whistling Garryowen. When out with the fox-hounds, he wore a stained red coat, another sometime hartog of the Captain's, surmounting well-cut breeches and gaiters, once again part of a generous employer's wardrobe. He was wearing the breeches and gaiters to-day, but his mind had wandered from sport to war. Tremendous military ardour possessed him. By the luck of things, on leaving the ale-house, he encountered Lionel Pomfret returning from fishing. Lionel had a great affection for Uncle, although he knew him to be a poacher on the sly. Uncle hailed him with respectful geniality, reasonably assured that five minutes' talk with t'young Squire meant more war news and a shining half-crown. On such occasions he employed a formula, rarely known to fail to open either hearts or purses.

"How well 'ee look, Master Lionel! And Lard bless 'ee, I was thinkin' of 'ee as you turned carner. Any fish this fine evening?"

Lionel Pomfret opened his creel and displayed a nice brace and a half. But Uncle was in no mood to talk of trout. He had more notable fish to fry.

"What be they Frenchies doing, sir?"

Lionel answered gravely:

"I hear that twenty thousand Germans have been repulsed at Nancy, but I don't believe it, Uncle."

"No more don't I, Master Lionel. These be troublous times."

Lionel nodded.

"Be we coming in?"

"Damn it, we can't keep out."

"What I says exzactly. The Rads be kickin' up a fine hullabaloo—a very dirty, timorsome lot. And bound to crawl down the pole bimeby."

"France is invaded," said Lionel.

"Quick work, sir."

"Quick? After forty years' elaborate preparation? This thing is horribly serious, Uncle. I'm wondering what they think about it in the village."

"I can tell 'ee, no man better. 'Tis none o' their business, they thinks. Such shameless ignerunce makes wiser folk value their wisdom. I happened into the *Sir John Barleycorn* just afore seein' you, sir. I'd a matter o' business wi' William Saint."

Not for wealth untold would Uncle have admitted that he visited an ale-house to drink ale. Lionel smiled. He knew his man.

"Very thirsty evening, too, Uncle."

"I bain't denying that, Master Lionel. And I did take a glass o' what they calls ale there for the good o' the house. We fell to talkin'. I made bold to tell 'em what me and Lord Roberts felt about that there Kayser. And it miffed 'em. I could see that. And the less they pore souls says the more they thinks. They be chewin' my cud now. But what do 'ee really think, sir?"

Lionel laughed, not wholeheartedly. He was a six months' bridegroom.

"I think, Uncle, that inside of a fortnight I shall be at my depot in Winchester, drilling recruits."

"Lard save us! And you wi' so young and be-utiful a wife!"

"Sir Geoffrey thinks as I do. There is going to be a terrific strain on the manhood of this country. Will it stand that strain?"

"I thinks it will, Master Lionel, so be as they chin-wobblin' politicians keeps their dirty fingers out o' pie. I'd like to march wi' 'ee to Winchester, and overseas, too, by Jo'!"

Lionel nodded. A minute later Uncle strode on his way with the expected half-crown snug in his breeches' pocket. He told himself that he had earned it.

When he reached his cottage, he found George, the youngest of his three sons, just back from the woods, where he worked as a hurdler at this time of year. The other sons were married and established in cottages of their own. Jane Mucklow was busy preparing the eight o'clock hot supper. An agreeable odour filled the kitchen. Uncle kicked the dust off his boots and entered the house, with George at his heels. The good smell of baked pork provoked, as usual, a pleasant word. Indeed, Habakkuk Mucklow had discovered very early in life that soft words do butter parsnips.

"Well, Mother, you looks very sanitary, and what a colour!"

"Got, as you well knows, from stewin' over a fire. Been painting your nose wi' ale, or worse, I reckons."

Uncle stroked his nose.

"'Tis a very handsome feature, Jane, and allers a true friend to your good cookin'. I met Master Lionel in village street, and let 'un know what a wise man

was thinking about the times. Agreed wi' every word, he did. I told 'un he'd be called to jine up again in Winchester inside o' fortnit. Like as not Garge here'll be wearin' out shoe-leather in some barrack-yard afore he's much older."

Mrs. Mucklow stared at him, paralysed by astonishment. George, being the most interested party, said heavily:

"Not if I knows meself."

"I say, Garge, as you'll enlist if they want 'ee."

"They won't want the likes o' me."

Jane Mucklow said sharply:

"Don't you go upsettin' the boy wi' your ridiculous war-talk, Father. He come nigh on leavin' us to freeze to death in Canady. Why should we fight to save they Frenchies?"

Uncle grinned and chuckled.

"Ah-h-h! I've a notion about that. I told 'un to the old Captain, and he said 'twas a very notable remark. Fight we shall and must to save our own souls and bodies."

George opened a wide mouth; his mother laughed scornfully.

"Never heard o' the British Fleet, I suppose?"

Uncle smiled. Such a smile might have been seen upon the face of Ulysses after his wanderings, when Penelope asked foolish question.

"Mother, I've seen they mighty ships o' war, which is what you can't brag on. But more'n our Fleet were wanted afore, in the days o' Bonaparty, and will be again. You mind that bit o' pork, and leave young Garge to me."

He gave undivided attention to George; the pleasant

smile faded from his face. His likeness to his sister came out.

"Be you afeard, Garge?"

George pulled himself together.

"I be bold as brass, except wi' maids."

"That any son o' mine should own up to that! Afeard wi' maids! What a gert booby! I be afeard *for* maids, if so be as they Proosians come rampin' into France. And 'tis true they be over the line a'ready."

"How do 'ee know that?" asked his wife.

"Never you mind, Mother. I picks up my information as you does, here and there. I told Master Lionel as how France was invaded, and he gave me half-a-crown, he did."

Uncle produced the half-crown as confirmation strong. George was much impressed.

"You earns money in wondersome ways, Father."

"I do. Now, Garge, I tell 'ee, fair and square, the likes o' you'll be wanted bad, and, mark my words, my lad, if you don't go willin' they'll take 'ee whether or no. I forgot to mention it to Master Lionel, but talk o' conscription be in the air."

"Stuff and nonsense!" exclaimed Mrs. Mucklow.

Uncle, fully alive to the advantage of leaving people to chew the cud of his wisdom, went outside to smoke a pipe before supper. He walked down the village street, carrying a high head and assuming the port of Mars. Bugles sounded in his ears, and the steady tramp of marching men. He had picked up the significant and terrifying word "conscription" from Captain Davenant, who asked for nothing better. Uncle had agreed with the Captain heartily, being very sensible of what drill had accomplished for himself, much as he hated

it at the time. He thought of George as clay to the hand of a sergeant, not as cannon fodder. "Afeard wi' maids!" What a confession!

He was not in the mood to engage others in talk, lumping all his neighbours together as a flock of silly snivelling sheep, sadly in need of a shepherd. For the first time in his life he paid the penalty of being a prophet, and felt strangely alone and unhonoured.

Suddenly he bethought him of his sister Susan. He had half-an-hour to spare before supper. She would be busy in her kitchen, but never too busy to exchange a word with him. Alfred would be still on the road. He strode along more briskly. Susan was the one persón living with whom Uncle was really himself, at best or worst a very simple, straightforward soul. He had never posed before her and—what a tribute to her character!—in her rather austere presence he avoided those whimsical perversions of the truth which so exasperated his wife. To a woman of brains he bowed the knee. Also, he was gratefully aware of Susan's enduring affection for him.

He wondered how she would take his news, for news it would be, that the Squire and Master Lionel were grimly confronting the certainty of England declaring war upon Germany. Susan read her *Daily Mail*, but not with any great faith in what newspaper men said. Having a singularly retentive memory, she prided herself upon collating contradictory statements made by irresponsible writers. Such critical powers were not exercised upon the Bible. Apparent discrepancies in the Holy Book could be, and were (so she held) reconciled by surpliced commentators.

Susan, so Uncle reflected, would deal out strong doses

of commonsense, which her brother, after due absorption, could in his turn distribute generously amongst the weak-kneed. There were moments when pity for his fellow-men overbrimmed in Uncle's heart, and filled him with an amorphous, inherent melancholy. He could rise to giddy heights of mirth and fall from them into unplumbed depths of depression. Susan, as he knew, stood solidly between these extremes.

He was in the melancholy mood when he entered her kitchen.

"Well, Susan, there be a nice bit o' pork frizzlin' in our oven, but I be in sore need o' spiritual nourishment."

"Whatever ails 'ee, Habakkuk?"

"'Tis the crool thought o' weepin' maids and mothers throughout the land, as robs me o' my appetite."

For the moment Uncle spoke with absolute sincerity. The thought of a nation in mourning had not entered his mind till he crossed the threshold of the Yellam cottage. But he accepted it as illuminating. And, instantly, his imagination draped the idea in deepest crêpe.

"Be you speaking o' French maids and mothers?"

"Being the man I am, I counts 'em all in wi' us. 'Tis cut-and-dried, as the saying goes. Old England takes the field."

Susan Yellam said drily:

"Old England takes the field. Well, dearie, you take a chair and tell us all about it."

Incredulity was written plain upon her face. Uncle opened fire at point-blank range.

"Sir Gaffrey says so, Susan. Master Lionel be hot-foot for Winchester, to drill recruities."

The shot went home. Mrs. Yellam's florid face paled.

She had deliberately put from her the dreadful possibility. But if Sir Geoffrey said so, it was so. The blood left her face, because her first thought had been for the gracious lady of the Manor, and the young wife, two women very dear to her. As the colour came back to her cheeks, she reflected that she, personally, was not involved in these fearful issues. Mr. Lionel was a professional soldier. Wife or no wife, a Pomfret would do his duty. England's army might have to fight side by side with the French, and England's army was invincible.

She said gravely:

"We be in God A'mighty's hands."

Uncle sat down, assuming a funereal expression which sat oddly upon his somewhat comical countenance. He did not share his sister's faith in an All-wise and Merciful Providence. Strong ale, perhaps, had weakened it, and over-indulgence in flesh-pots. But he dared not contradict his sister.

He fired another shot.

"Captain Davenant be sartain sure that our noble army be too small for such a tremenjous affair. He goes further than that, Susan. I wouldn't deceive 'ee or try to frighten 'ee for a barrel o' ale, but he be flustratingly positive that we be drawn into the bloodiest war as never was, and he do say that God A'mighty fights on the side o' the biggest army. His tarr'ble words, Susan, not mine. There be millions o' Proosians marchin' into France this very day, and the Captain says they Frenchies bain't ready for 'em."

He expected a cooling stream of comfort and a rebuttal of what the Captain said. If anybody could stand

up against so redoubtable a personage it would be Susan Yellam. She said slowly:

"The Captain says that our army be too small! The King'll have to call for—millions?"

Uncle nodded dolorously. To his utter amazement and confounding, Susan raised her apron, and covered her face with it.

The abomination of coming desolation overwhelmed both of them.

CHAPTER VI

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

UNCLE was quick, like all practised orators, to realise the effect of his words not only upon a sister, but upon himself. He emerged from the depths, as a swimmer after a dive, shaking his head and opening his mouth to the ambient air. A happy thought occurred to him.

"Susan," he said, in a more cheerful voice, "I be mazed as you be, but things bain't so dark as they seem, and I've Squire's own word for it that figures lie to beat Satan hisself."

Mrs. Yellam looked at him interrogatively.

"I be allers, so to speak, a very calkilatin' man, rampaged by Fortin into makin' sixpence do duty for a shillin'. Now, I asks you this, and I means to put the question, fair and square, to Captain Davenant to-morrer marning. 'Tis a common saying that one Englishman be so good as ten Frenchies in a stand-up fight. That be a very comfortsome thought, old girl."

"Which I don't hold wi', for one."

"Don't 'ee? I wager the half-crown Master Lionel gi' me that you be the equal o' ten Frenchwomen, and, old as I be, I'd fair scorn to turn back on any 'arf-dozen furriners. If so be as my calkilatin' ain't out o' whack, our noble army o' two hundred thousand valiant souls be more'n equal o' two million Frenchies.

And, if that be so, the Germans be up agen four millions in all. Leastways, if I bain't out in my figurin'."

Mrs. Yellam smiled faintly.

"Your figures, Habakkuk, be Satan's figures. I allows that one true Englishman can down three Frenchies, not more. Men'll be wanted—and soon."

Uncle remarked mournfully:

"Such talk takes away my appetite for cracklin'. I go my ways, dear, leavin' this mossel o' comfort behind me: they won't be askin' for widows' only sons. Good-night to 'ee."

After Uncle's departure Mrs. Yellam busied herself with her work, pausing now and again to sigh deeply. If Sir Geoffrey Pomfret said that England was coming in, why, England was in. A doubtful hypothesis became certainty. And some widows' sons, if she knew her countrymen, would fight for England, tooth and nail, even if they were not directly asked to do so.

Presently Alfred appeared, sharp-set after a good day's business. He repeated the gossip of the market-place. Russia was going to surprise the world. England must come in. A greengrocer, on intimate terms with a lady of quality, had told him as a secret that the Guards were already embarking for Belgium. Alfred concluded cheerfully:

"In Salisbury, Mother, 'tis agreed that six weeks'll see the end on't."

"Captain Davenant be talkin' o' conscription, Alferd."

"Let him talk. He's a sour man. I put my faith in God Almighty, not in the likes of him."

"Ah-h-h!"

"I say to myself, in all Christian humility, that God Almighty in His wisdom is fair fed up with the Proo-

sians. Such talk as they use, all spitting and choking, is quite enough to sicken ordinary folks. 'Tis the swelled head that this Kayser has. However, wiser men prophesy a rare uplifting move in trade."

"Alferd—don't talk o' that. 'Tis more than I can bear to hear o' folks makin' money out o' the miseries o' others."

He stared at her, noticing at last her drawn expression.

"You ain't got the headache, Mother?"

"No."

"Wouldn't own up to it, if you had. Something's gnawing at you."

Very gravely she told him about the young Squire. Alfred's face fell, thinking of Joyce Pomfret, and then of Fancy. What would that pretty dear be feeling, if her Alfred was on the march? The light faded from his rubicund face. Till that moment the possibility of going had never occurred to him. If England did take a hand in the mighty game, surely her Army and Fleet would suffice for all eventualities. Suddenly, he banged the table with his clenched fist, startling his mother.

"Alferd—!" she exclaimed irritably.

Alfred hastened to apologise. A confounding thought had begotten a thoughtless action. He said earnestly:

"Fancy is a oner for telling fortunes with cards."

Mrs. Yellam frowned. Cards she held to be playthings of Satan, expressly invented by him together with strong drink and bad women. Alfred continued hastily:

"A lady in Salisbury, real quality, Mother, told Fancy's fortune."

"Did she? Better be using her needle, I says."

"No doubt. 'Tis a very odd thing, and food for sober

thought, but the lady did foretell as Fancy'd marry a soldier."

"A very foolish, mischievous notion to put i' the maid's head."

Alfred nodded. Then he said portentously:

"It might come true, Mother, if the pessimists be right."

"Pessimists?"

" 'Tis a new word to me, and means—crokers, as looks on the dark side of the cloud."

"Well, what do they tell 'ee?"

" 'Twas a solitary he. A shoemaker by trade, and a radical. The smell of leather be enough to account for his politics and gloomy views. When I take shoes to him, we always pass time o' day, and I come away thinking 'tis just before dawn on a cold, drizzling, November morning. He says to me: 'My lad, these Proosians may be drinking ale in Salisbury before this war's over.' I laughed at him. And he told me I'd laugh t'other side of my face in six months."

Mrs. Yellam made no comment, a strange abstention. Her firm jaws set beneath strongly-marked brows, her eyes glowered into the future. Mother and son finished the meal in silence.

These things were talked over on Monday, the 2nd of August.

On the Wednesday all England knew that we were at war with Germany.

The first effect of this stupendous happening was comical. The banks were closed; many people found themselves without money and unable to borrow it. Fishpingle, the bailiff at the Home Farm, had to lend Lionel Pomfret five pounds to take him to Winchester.

Some pessimists predicted a financial panic. The foreign stock exchanges transacted no business. All this affected Nether-Applewhite but mildly; tongues wagged a little faster than usual; very few believed that an Expeditionary Force would be sent to France. Sir Geoffrey Pomfret walked down to the village and talked with his people. His jolly face and hearty voice indicated immense relief. He—and thousands like him—had been tormented by the fear that a nation stigmatised as shopkeepers would place self-interest before honour. He writhed when he recalled the cynical gibe of the Russian to England's ambassador at a time when England did "keep out." Old Captain Davenant and the Squire were types of men whom the more Radical press derided as reactionary and fire-eaters. Let the verdict of history speak for such after the war. Few, to-day, will deny that the privileged classes with most at stake stood shoulder to shoulder in their determination to scrap everything except scraps of paper bearing England's sign-manual.

The villagers listened agape to Sir Geoffrey and Captain Davenant. Then each went his way perfectly satisfied that others would dance to war's pipings and alarums, whilst they "carried on" as before.

Old Gilbert Parish, a great-granfer, was convinced that war had been declared with the hereditary foe. He asked Mr. Hamlin shrilly, holding hand to ear:

"What I wants to know, Pa'son, be this—whatever shall we do wi' they Frenchies when us have beat'h 'em?"

Mr. Hamlin answered gravely: "I suppose we shall have to eat them, Master Gilbert."

The monagenarian displayed toothless gums.

"Ah-h-h! That's what the Dook said at Waterloo.

'Up, Guards, and eat 'en,' he says. *And they did!*"

"Was you there, Granfer, on that notable day?" asked a bystander.

The old fellow cackled joyously.

"'Tis so far back along, I disremembers. To speak sober truth, my lad, the Dook won that gert battle wi'out me. 'Tis a fact beyond gainsayin' that I be here, and hale and hearty, because, maybe, I was not there."

His humour so tickled him that he hobbled forthwith to the *Sir John Barleycorn* to wet a still serviceable whistle. Many followed his example; the two taverns sold much ale.

In a miraculously short time village life ambled on as before. The small boys played at soldiers; some of the more prescient mothers laid in stores. Lionel Pomfret returned from Winchester with the assurance, hot from the mouth of the officer commanding the dépôt, that every regular would be sent abroad. The Squire was absorbed in the details. Each officer would be allowed thirty pounds of kit, such kit to be snugly packed in a pale-green carry-all. It comprised one change, two blankets, a few surgical dressings, a folding-lamp, a pair of wire-cutters, and under-linen. The Territorials and Yeomanry would defend our shores. According to experts, invasion might be deemed practicable, if unlikely. Next day Lionel went to London, to the War Office. He came back with a Captain's commission.

The Government had taken over the railroads, and, at first, trains were inconveniently belated. Liège was covering herself with imperishable glory, holding up hordes of Germans. In the rural districts the comforting impression prevailed that the All-Highest War Lord had gone stark, staring mad, and that a peace-loving

nation would kick him and his out of the country. Hamlin, reading feverishly papers and reviews, neglecting, for the first time in his life, parochial duties, rejoiced in the premature conclusion that there burned no hate in English hearts against the German people to whom civilisation owed so much. He adumbrated peace before Christmas, and believed that a world-war would end war. For a parish priest, he might be reckoned, intellectually, far above the average. Men of keener and bigger brains shared his views. Sir Geoffrey Pomfret, as might be expected, thought otherwise. There is no pessimist like your optimist when he finds that the prognostications of his less robust moments have come to pass. He said almost truculently to his wife:

"It is some comfort to reflect, my dear Mary, that *we* were right, and all these axe-grinding demagogues wrong. I could hang Haldane with my own hand. And I feel in my bones that this is going to be a long business—a full year at least."

The Squire was sorely taken aback, when Lord Kitchener trebled this estimate. He cursed politicians of his own party when Namur fell. Indeed, he blamed politicians and publicists of every colour and creed, pinning his faith to Army and Navy, sorely disgruntled with the Foreign Office and the Diplomatic Service. No more unhappy man gazed across his broad acres wondering miserably whether they would be his in three years' time.

There ensued, as will be remembered, an amazing epidemic of national apathy, which aroused trenchant criticism in neutral countries. People bought maps and pins, and forgot to move the pins. Small things became again of paramount importance. The King had demanded half a million more regulars. But business went on as usual.

First Impressions

A famous scribe has chronicled the supreme event of this transition period. Carpentier defeated Bombadier Wells! Possibly, the general indifference, an indifference largely due to ignorance, was superficial. It is significant that thousands of holiday-makers returned quietly to their own homes.

Lionel Pomfret and his wife moved to Winchester, where Lionel was kept busy at the dépôt. For the moment, his own battalion of the Rifle Brigade was in India. Another battalion had joined the Expeditionary Force. Lionel might be called upon to join it at twenty-four hours' notice. Joyce Pomfret, his wife, perceived that he wanted to do so.

An American, with the liveliest powers of observation, visiting Nether-Applewhite, and talking, let us say, to Mrs. Yellam and Fancy, would have gone away convinced that both these women, each the antithesis of the other, were unconcerned with the war. Really the thought of it obsessed them night and day. But they rarely spoke of it. Mrs. Yellam deliberately put from her the possibility of losing her son, partly because she had a positive assurance from the Parson that Alfred, as a public carrier, would be exempted from military service if conscription became necessary, and partly because the fact that she tended four graves in the churchyard must surely be taken into account by an All-wise and Merciful Providence. Like most of us, she had constructed her own particular statute of limitations and liabilities. She had endured more than her proper share of bludgeonings. Accordingly, her mind dwelt upon the war as affecting others. She grieved for Lady Pomfret and the Squire. If Master Lionel were taken—! The only son and heir to such a fine property—!

Fancy, sister of a beloved brother serving in a battleship, fell a prey to more intimate and poignant considerations. As the child of a delicate mother who had died in giving her birth, pre-natal influence, perhaps, had endowed her with sensibilities common to all women who are physically weaker than they should be, with minds and imaginations more active than their bodies. From her tenderest years Fancy had indulged in meditations concerning angels. Her father habitually spoke of his wife as an angel hovering close to one whom she had never held in her arms. Fancy believed him absolutely. Darkness had no terrors for the child, when she went to bed, because, in addition to her mother, the four evangelists guarded her cot. She was quite positive that she had seen her mother, clothed in shining tissues, with wings like a dove. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John became personal friends with whom the mite affirmed solemnly that she talked and played. Her father, a dreamer rather than a doer, encouraged these fancies, which justified his selection of her Christian name in obstinate defiance of the wishes of his family.

The first effect of the war upon Fancy, apart from her sisterly anxieties, was a tightening of the bond between master and maid. Mr. Hamlin held strong democratic opinions, a source of friction between himself and Sir Geoffrey Pomfret. He desired ardently a more equable distribution, not merely of wealth, but of health and intelligence. He believed absolutely in the equality of souls before God, and he recognised with ever-increasing satisfaction the potentialities of bodies and minds, if taken in hand early in life. His disabilities as a teacher shewed themselves in a too direct manner of speech, an abruptness caused by an excess rather than a lack of

sympathy and perception. As Man and Priest, he shunned those easy by-paths beloved by many of us when we have disagreeable duties to perform. He marched straight to his objectives, regardless of objections.

At first sight, Mr. Hamlin recognised in his parlour-maid qualities of which she herself was delightfully unconscious. As parson of a country parish which outwardly and inwardly had changed but little since the eighteenth century, he had fought desperately against the mental and spiritual apathy of his flock, seizing any weapon that lay to his hand. He worked with people for people, using Peter to convert Paul, constantly disappointed but rarely discouraged. He had been offered preferment; his sermons challenged interest outside Nether-Applewhite but he had no personal ambition beyond the consuming desire to help those whom he knew and loved to help themselves. Sir Geoffrey Pomfret supported him in this, but Parson and Squire worked upon diametrically opposing lines. All the instincts of the lord of the manor were protective. To that end he had made and was prepared to go on making personal sacrifices of leisure, pleasure and money. According to Hamlin, this encouraged helplessness and ignorance. Poverty held out eager hands for doles, displaying that comical form of gratitude which has been defined as a lively sense of favours to come.

Hamlin, in common with most sincere reformers, divided the world into two classes—the helpers and hinderers. Between these lay, of course, a No Man's Land, where each class wandered aimlessly; the helpers, like the Squire, became hinderers and hinderers, like Uncle, might become, unexpectedly, helpers. Fancy, he

acclaimed as a helper in or out of the debateable territory. Insensibly, her refinement and modesty would raise the tone in his kitchen, and radiate purer beams from a house hospitably accessible to all his congregation. From time to time, when he was alone at meals, he would ask the maid odd questions, and listen attentively to her replies. Such questions were disconcerting to Fancy, but, as was intended, they provoked intelligence to answer them. Ever since ordination, Hamlin had realised the almost insuperable barriers interposed by tradition, by training, by a thousand and one conditions and consequences, between the privileged and unprivileged classes. From the first he had set himself the task of breaking down such barriers. He candidly admitted that most of his parishioners were liars and hypocrites when it came to dealing with them frankly as between man and man, and still more so as between man and woman. They said, respectfully, what each felt that the Parson wished them to say, repeating the old shibboleths and sesames which opened, possibly, purses but not hearts.

After the fall of Namur, he said to Fancy:

"Do you feel patriotic?"

The question of patriotism had been raised (and not laid) by a publicist in one of the current reviews, but the writer had presented a point of view coloured and discoloured by intimate knowledge of industrial England. He had not touched upon his theme as it affected the rural districts.

"I hope so, sir," replied Fancy.

"How far, I wonder, would your patriotism carry you?"

He knew that Fancy was engaged to Alfred Yellam,

and had congratulated her sincerely. He knew, also, that she had no intention of getting married for some time to come.

Fancy stood at attention, much perplexed, but flattered. She had wit enough to realise that her master put the question in certain faith that she would endeavour to answer it truthfully.

"I can't tell," she faltered. "Sounds silly, don't it, sir?"

"Not at all. I am wondering how far my patriotism would carry me. What is patriotism, Fancy?"

"Love of country, sir."

"Why do we feel it?"

His keen eyes rested quietly on hers.

Fancy grappled with this, struggling to rise adequately to the occasion.

"I suppose 'tis gratitude, sir."

"Good. But gratitude is imponderable." For an instant he had forgotten that he was talking to his parlourmaid. Beholding a wrinkle, he said quickly: "I mean, that gratitude is not easy to weigh or measure. It is immense," he smiled at her, "when it marches hand in hand with self-interest. It shrinks horribly when self-interest marches or runs in the opposite direction. Do you follow me?"

"Yes, sir; thank you, sir."

"Don't thank me," he said, with a touch of irritation. He continued quietly: "We must all try to weigh our patriotism, because every one of us will be asked to exercise it. Leaving out the men able to bear arms, I am thinking for the moment of the women, young and old. An immense burden is about to be imposed on them. That is why I am speaking to you. I held the mistaken

view that this war would soon be over. But it is plain that we are fighting an enemy overwhelmingly strong, who is setting all laws, human and divine, at defiance. I want to measure our patriotism, my own, yours, everybody's; but I do so in fear and trembling."

Fancy, outwardly calm, presenting the impassive mask of the well-trained servant, became conscious of tingling and throbbing pulses. A strong man appeals most strenuously to the sympathy of a woman, when he permits her to have a glimpse of his weakness. She spoke impulsively, quite forgetting her "place," as she told herself afterwards.

"You be thinking of Mr. Edward."

It was a flash of intuition.

The Parson had four stout sons, but Teddy, the youngest, was his Benjamin. Teddy and Joyce had inherited from Mrs. Hamlin joyous temperaments. The other sons resembled their father. All of them were "doing well" in a worldly sense. The eldest was a don at Cambridge, Fellow and Tutor of his College. The others were in business, climbing hand over hand the commercial ladder. Teddy, with not so good a start as his brothers, had entered the Railway Service. Since Fancy's arrival at the Vicarage he had spent a too short holiday at home. His jolly, unaffected ways captivated Fancy instantly. Life, as the maids put it, entered a dull house and filled it with sunshine. Teddy brought with him to Nether-Applewhite wonderful news. He had been offered and had accepted a billet worth four hundred a year—startling advancement for so young a man. His unaffected joy in his own good fortune warmed all sympathetic hearts.

The Parson looked up sharply.

"Yes," he answered curtly. He had finished breakfast, but still sat at table. Fancy saw that he was nervously crumbling a small piece of bread.

"But Mr. Edward won't have to go, sir."

Hamlin hesitated. But, inviting confidence, he was not the man to withhold it churlishly. He said slowly:

"Between ourselves, Fancy, Mr. Edward wishes to go. I have a letter from him this morning, asking for my advice on the subject. It means, for him and me, a great sacrifice."

Fancy gasped.

"Oh, dear! You'll never let him go—surely?"

Hamlin rose, a tall, gaunt figure.

"My patriotism," he said grimly, "is not quite so lively, Fancy, as it was last night."

He went out of the room. Fancy began to clear away the breakfast things, much troubled, sorely perplexed, alive to her finger-tips with the dismal consciousness that life had become suddenly confoundingly difficult. If Alfred took a notion to enlist, and if he consulted her about it, as surely he would, to what sort of strain would her patriotism be subjected? She, too, approached the question in fear and trembling. At the moment "things," as she vaguely expressed it, were going better and better for Alfred. War seemed to have oiled all commercial wheels. On Sundays her happy swain soared into an empyrean of prosperity and opulence where he sat enthroned high above her, talking exuberantly of a future she dared not envisage. The good fellow assured her that the Germans would soon be on the run, with English sabres hewing them down, with English bayonets in their fat backs. Would such a man, travelling at excess speed into Tom Tiddler's Ground,

fingering daily larger and ever larger pieces of silver and gold, stop suddenly and abandon everything?

He might.

If patriotism seized him, as it had seized Mr. Edward, the strangling grip would choke ambition, self-interest, and woman's love.

She told herself miserably that Mr. Edward would go. More, his father would not raise a finger to stop him. As the Parson left the dining-room, she guessed that his decision had been made already.

Within a week it became common knowledge in the village that Mr. Edward Hamlin had enlisted in the Guards. He would appear amongst his father's parishioners in a private's kit, and salute respectfully his old friend, Captain Pomfret.

He was the first "gentleman" in those parts to relinquish fortune at the call of duty. And his shining example, so his father perceived, had moved mountains of too solid flesh. As yet the great recruiting campaign had not begun.

Two days afterwards George Mucklow followed the parson's son into the ranks.

CHAPTER VII

SECOND IMPRESSIONS

AUGUST—with its stupefying surprises, disappointments, and acrimonies—drew to a close. The black Sunday, at the end of the month, will never be forgotten by those who happened to be in London at the time. For a few terrible hours it was said that our Expeditionary Force had been annihilated. In the evening an official contradiction lifted the town out of a pea-soup fog of despair.

Day by day, the Hun hordes advanced. Sir Geoffrey devoured his morning papers, talked over the immeasurable possibilities with his wife and Fishpingle, and finally determined to tap fresh information at its source. He went up to London, spent three days at his clubs, and returned to Nether-Applewhite an angry and disillusioned man. Having many friends in high places, some of them old schoolfellows and kinsmen, who had become pale and anxious Cabinet Ministers, he buttonholed them all, demanding the truth in his jovial, autocratic fashion.

"A damned lot of Mandarins," he told his wife, "nodding their confounded heads and saying nothing. At the club, by Jove! I felt as if I were in a submarine with the periscope shot away. Every other fellow I met was 'credibly informed' about something or t'other, and I could have made a pot of money, my dear, laying odds

against their precious bits of information. The Government is scared stiff, at the mercy of the Labourites. Out of the welter of talk and twaddle I collared this conviction: the England we love has vanished never to return. Kitchener says that we shall be bled white, and the best will be the first to go."

Lady Pomfret smiled faintly.

"George Mucklow has gone."

"Has he? I shall give Uncle a sovereign. Now, Mary, sick as I feel about the incompetence and crass stupidity of the people who have got us into this mess, I shall carry a stiff tail in the village."

"I am sure you will, dear."

"Yes. I asked 'em at the War Office what I could do. Get recruits, they told me. I shall mug up a lecture, dealing with military terminology. My people don't know the difference between a brigade and an army-corps. Coming down in the train, I thought out some useful diagrams. And, Mary, unless a miracle happens, the slaughter will be appalling. We must turn our dear old house into a Red Cross Hospital."

"I had thought of that, Geoffrey. We are quite ready."

"Get your staff together, a competent, professional nurse, and the pick of the women in the village."

"Susan Yellam has promised to help."

"None better! The sooner we get to work and stop jawing and fuddling our wits over newspapers, the less miserable we shall be."

"Yes, yes."

After dinner, the autocrat of Nether-Applewhite felt less unhappy.

Upon the following morning, bright and early, Squire

and Parson put their heads together at the Vicarage. Since the marriage of Hamlin's daughter to Lionel Pomfret, the somewhat strained relations between the two fathers had pleasantly relaxed. Hamlin had this advantage over the Squire. He could see and understand the autocrat's lordly point of view. The Squire was, and always would be, incapable of standing in the Parson's shoes. Possibly, the war had modified their extreme opinions. The Squire read and approved the leading articles in *The Morning Post;* the Parson read omniverously papers and reviews, but he would have admitted candidly that *The Westminster Gazette* embodied most accurately his ideas and judgments.

Both men were uncomfortably conscious that grave blunders had been perpetrated by Authority.

When they had lit their after-breakfast pipes, Sir Geoffrey laid before Hamlin a synopsis of what he had gleaned in London, and his impressions thereon, but he spoke temperately, perceiving whimsical gleams in his Parson's eyes.

"A lot of fools believe that Russians are pouring through this country. An old pal and myself tried to investigate on our own. We went to Euston. By Jove! we dropped on to a porter who swore that he'd seen thousands of 'em passing through Willesden, big bearded men in queer uniforms, at dead o' night. To show the ignorance of these fellows, Hamlin, I'll repeat to you what was said in answer to my questions. The porter affirmed positively that he had seen six hundred thousand of 'em! *Six hundred thousand!* I asked him, then, if he knew how many soldiers could be packed into one train. He scratched his head at that. Finally, he admitted that he could swear to three trains full of these

bearded warriors. When I told him, as an old soldier, that three trains might carry three thousand troops he absquatulated. A man at the War Office, whose name I can't mention, told me, next day, that no Russians from Russia were passing through England. A few, coming from America to Russia, have aroused this ridiculous gossip."

Hamlin nodded.

"I told my wife last night that knowledge is simply unachievable, because the biggest men don't know yet the temper of the country. Nobody knows. But I'll tell you this: the Government is afraid of the Industrials, terrified of strikes, terrified of Ireland, terrified, of course, of being kicked out. A sort of mental palsy has 'em by the throat. They are putting out feelers, tentatively approaching everybody. It's a sorry business. The bright spot is the response from our Colonies; India is behaving well. That must be a rare sell for the Kayser. Well, well; I've let off a little steam. Let's consider ourselves and what we can do. Men must be got. In this village your dear boy has set a glorious example."

"George Mucklow enlisted three days ago."

"So my wife tells me. I propose to give a lecture in the school-house on elementary military dispositions, so that our people will be able to read their papers with some sort of intelligence."

"They don't read papers—much."

"I want you to fill the school-house for me."

"With pleasure."

"We shall open a Red Cross Hospital as soon as may be, at the Court."

Hamlin promised cordial co-operation. He had never doubted the Squire's willingness or capacity to "do his

bit." And very mournfully he told himself that, making due allowance for Sir Geoffrey's reactionary sentiments and hatred of politicians the indictment brought by him against the Mandarins was in the main justified. He said quietly:

"Most of my considered judgments are in the melting-pot."

"Bless my soul! I never expected to hear you say that. So are mine. The main question for all of us is this: will the country rise to this stupendous emergency? I suppose the mere mention of conscription gives you a fit?"

"I carry an open mind about it."

"You amaze me, Hamlin. We were both 'blue-water school' men."

"Yes. You use the past tense. I am humbly sensible that what I have felt and acted upon, principles and theories essentially rooted in peace and for peace, is of the past. I shall leave them there. The needs of the present are obsessing." He paused a moment; when he spoke again his voice held conviction: "Out of the darkness, I see light."

Sir Geoffrey asked eagerly:

"What light?"

"The light of a happier civilisation, of a broader and more sympathetic internationalism. The ashes of this conflagration may fertilise anew the whole earth. It must be so."

He had surprised Sir Geoffrey a moment back; it was the Squire's turn to surprise him. Hamlin expected a wail from the many-acred lord of the manor, a Jeremiad personal and embittered. Inevitably the men of large estates, with little outside their domains to support them,

must suffer cruelly. It was difficult, indeed, to envisage the Squire of Nether-Applewhite without his shooting and hunting, with a much-reduced establishment, constrained to cheese-paring, entertaining wounded Tommies instead of county magnates. Sir Geoffrey answered as humbly as the Parson:

"God send it may be so, Hamlin. This is a war between autocracy and democracy; and I don't believe in democracies, as you know."

Hamlin remained silent. The Squire continued, more vehemently:

"Can you mention one country that is a democracy? Is America a democracy?"

"We shall know soon."

"Is it a democracy to-day? Uncle Sam says so. But isn't America governed by the few and for the few? Do you call France a democracy after the revelations of this Caillaux trial? Are we a democracy, in the true sense? Perhaps Switzerland comes nearer the standard mark, but I know nothing about Switzerland. I have always distrusted profoundly the mob."

"That may be at the root of the trouble. Distrust breeds distrust. If this war should open all eyes, if men should learn to see each other as they are—much alike in the mass—and not, not, as they blindly believe, essentially different, why, then this war will not have been waged in vain."

Sir Geoffrey wrestled valiantly with these words.

"I grope, Hamlin, I grope. It sounds humiliating when one is past sixty."

Hamlin nodded. He was groping, too, but he had greater faith in human nature. He said hesitatingly:

"The result of all wars, according to history, has been

this: the poor emerge poorer; the rich richer. I hope that it will not be so after this world-war. And our energies should be directed to that end, Pomfret:—a more generous distribution of material wealth, a happier understanding between all classes, a breaking-down of barriers everywhere, not only as between man and man, but as between nation and nation."

Sir Geoffrey jumped up, holding out his hand.

"You are a good fellow, Hamlin, sound at core. I have often misjudged you in the past. Forgive me! The past, as we knew it, is dead. We will work together in the present."

Hamlin rose quickly, grasping the outstretched hand. After discussing practical details concerning the lecture, they separated. The Squire strode on to the village, much heartened. The Parson sat down at his desk to write the Sunday morning sermon. For a time, he put no pen to paper. He leaned head upon hand, thinking deeply. Out of the dump-heap which was left of his pet theories, he tried to piece together some sort of mosaic pavement upon which he could stand. It was difficult to realise the change in himself, more difficult to realise the change in the Squire. But the change had taken place. What would be the effect on his parishioners? Who would help? Who would hinder? If this war meant the regeneration and reconstruction of the world, all were involved. He thought of the dead Pope, who had passed away without exciting a ripple of excitement outside the Vatican. What part would his successor play? Would the Church of England grasp a tremendous opportunity? Would the Noncomformists gird up their loins for the spiritual battle?

Consider Armageddon how he might and did, from

every point of view which presented itself to an active and prescient brain,—the material outlook of diplomatists struggling to adjust the balance of European powers, of monarchs gazing at tottering thrones, of politicians still grabbing loaves and fishes, of business men thinking of their tills, of the rank and file in all countries working apathetically for their daily bread,—this thought rose up and dominated others. To him and men like him, ardently concerned with the potentialities of souls, ordained teachers of God's Word, called upon to interpret, so far as they could, the mysterious designs of Omnipotence, the issues shone clearly forth. Evil was arrayed against Good. The pomps and vanities of the world were marshalled against the powers of the Spirit.

And, in the end, the Spirit would triumph.

He began his sermon.

The Squire, meanwhile, was approaching the *Sir John Barleycorn* tavern, intending to have a word with William Saint, and, later on, with Susan Yellam and others, whom he regarded as aides-de-camp. Not being a very judicious reader of character, indolently disposed (because he was so busy himself, to accept his own people as they appeared to be, he regarded William Saint as a respectable, intelligent publican, who had been an excellent servant as first footman at the Court. He counted upon William as a likely "whipper-in" in the hunt for recruits. The Boniface of the *Pomfret Arms,* the larger of the two Nether-Applewhite taverns, happened to be stout and scant o' breath. He seldom stirred out of his snug bar-parlour. William Saint scoured the country-side, a very energetic, enterprising fellow.

"Morning, William."

"Good morning, Sir Geoffrey."

The Squire removed his hat and wiped an ample brow. He had found Saint in the sanded tap-room, overhauling supplies. He noted the man's drab complexion, and wondered whether he consumed too much of his own beer. The publican asked his old master deferentially if he would drink a glass of ale. Time was when the Squire never refused such invitations. To-day, he declined the ale, saying trenchantly:

"No, no. We shall have to tighten our belts, William. Take my word for it. You must reckon with being hit. We shall all be hit in our purses and our stomachs."

William Saint agreed politely. He had no intention of being hit in either place, but he kept that to himself. Already he was secretly enrolled amongst the would-be profiteers, and resolutely determined to extract good from an ill wind. Sir Geoffrey stated the nature of his errand. The village must set an example to less beatified hamlets, such as Ocknell, for example. Did William think the younger men would come forward with enthusiasm? William was doubtful about the enthusiasm. With discreet pressure from Authority, they might be induced to follow the example of George Mucklow. The Squire slapped his thigh.

"I am very pleased with George Mucklow. A snug billet shall be kept for him."

William smiled, not very pleasantly.

"His father, Sir Geoffrey, used pressure."

"Did he, b'Jove? And very proper, too. Uncle is one of the right sort. Even his weaknesses are endearing. The truth is, William, in such damnable times as these we must keep an eye peeled for the good in our fellowmen, and wink the other discreetly."

Perhaps William profited by this advice, and winked

the eye farthest from Sir Geoffrey. After more conversation, dealing strictly with recruiting methods to be applied to a community essentially peace-loving, Sir Geoffrey walked off and on, very well satisfied with his talk with an old servant. William apostrophised his diminishing figure in language never printed nowadays.

As the Squire walked down village he, too, like the Parson, thought seriously of what he should say to his people when he met them in the school-house. He was not concerned with spiritual issues. As a former M.F.H., he went a-hunting recruits with the same ardour and resource formerly consecrated to foxes. With profoundest sincerity he wished that he were of an age to bear arms. Indeed, he had offered himself, as an ex-Guardsman, quite ready to tackle a new drill-manual, to an old schoolfellow, now a general at the War Office. Sound advice had been tendered him.

"You can serve your country, Pomfret, on your own pitch. We shall want men and food. Food may become the more difficult problem."

Hence the allusion to tightened belts.

Sir Geoffrey walked briskly, reflecting complacently upon his excellent physical condition. He might be slightly dazed in mind, but fit as a fiddle in body. An odd expression that! What constituted a "fit" fiddle? Obviously, an instrument tuned to the right pitch. He felt taut all over. What had kept him fit at an age when many men of his acquaintance were falling into the sere and yellow stage of life? Sport. To scrap sport filled him with apprehension. So far, sport in England went on as usual. When he visited Euston to make enquiries concerning Russians, he had seen many cheery-looking fellows on their way north, bent on slaying grouse and

stags, reasonably convinced in their own simple minds that, Germans or no Germans, the world must wag on as before. Sir Geoffrey was not so optimistic. He knew much better. Already the supreme sacrifice of an only son had been demanded of him and made instantly. Other sacrifices bulked larger and larger in the immediate future. Standing in his fine hall, with the portraits of dead-and-gone Pomfrets looking down upon him, he had smelt anticipatingly the pungent odours of carbolic acid and iodoform. The stately saloon must be turned into a ward—! The mere thought was hateful, but he never flinched from it. Let the poor boys come! He would welcome them with courtesy and geniality. A Mandarin predicted a five-shilling-in-the-pound income tax! The Squire had responded generously to the Prince of Wales's Fund.

The situation could be summed up in one all-embracing word—Hell!

Little girls curtsied, small boys touched their caps, as the Autocrat of Nether-Applewhite passed them by with a kindly word and glance for each. He reflected: "The little 'uns are out of it, bless 'em!" He wondered whether respectful salutations would last his time. They were dear to him, outward and visible signs of the respect paid to Authority. Would they be scrapped? The Government had taken over the railroads. If the Labourites came into power, the land might be grabbed ruthlessly.

Sir Geoffrey walked less briskly, as the possibility obtruded itself.

He stopped first at Uncle's cottage. Mrs. Mucklow received him. Uncle, it appeared, was at work, thatching a dormer window, which exacted his particular skill.

Yes, George, poor boy, had gone for a soldier. His father had insisted upon it.

"Quite right," said the Squire heartily.

Jane Mucklow sniffed. She dared not contradict the Squire, but a sour face betrayed her feelings. The Squire laid a sovereign on the mantelpiece, saying that it was for Uncle, with the donor's compliments. Jane thanked him, wondering whether the piece of gold could be despatched, surreptitiously, to George. Always, Uncle got credit for what more deserving individuals accomplished. An exasperating thought! A recital of her own aches and pains, however, provoked the promise of a bottle of port. Sir Geoffrey shook hands with his former cook on leaving, and said graciously:

"Now, remember, Jane, if George gets leave and comes home, I want to see him. Send him up to the Hall."

"Thank you kindly, sir."

Sir Geoffrey went his way. As he approached the Yellam cottage, he muttered half audibly:

"Good people. Good people."

If he had known the truth—! At this moment Jane Mucklow was reviling him, because she laid her George's approaching death at the Squire's door. She made quite sure—and so did George—that he would be killed in his first action. With much reluctance we present these two old servants of the Autocrat smiling deferentially to his face and cursing him behind his back! And he believed so absolutely in their honesty and sincerity.

Five minutes later, Mrs. Yellam dusted a chair which needed no dusting. The Squire sat down upon it. He liked and respected Susan Yellam, and she—you may be sure—was well aware of that. No insincerity lurked behind her welcoming smile. But, in justice to the un-

happy Jane Mucklow, it must be stated that Susan happened to be independent of the Autocrat. Many times and oft had Uncle been "behindhand" with his rent. More than once Sir Geoffrey had remitted that rent altogether, simply because Uncle was so knowledgeable about foxes and deer, and such a wrath-disarming scallywag even in his cups. Mrs. Yellam paid her rent punctually, and possessed independent means. She had never been in service. She exercised brains, rare in any village, which enabled her to apprehend something withheld from the unprivileged classes, to wit:—that position carried with it crushing responsibilities and disabilities. Mr. Fishpingle, so near and dear to Sir Geoffrey, a friend and servant of fifty years, had often pointed out to her the sacrifices made by the Squire for his people. And she had kept eyes and ears open to these, deducing inferences from them.

For some minutes Sir Geoffrey talked about the Red Cross Hospital, enlisting Susan's sympathies. Co-operation had been promised already to Lady Pomfret.

"My lady be none too strong," observed Mrs. Yellam.

The Squire was not of Mrs. Yellam's opinion, but he didn't say so. He mentioned his proposed lecture, and solemnly invited her considered views on the recruiting campaign. She was not enthusiastic.

"Be they wanted real bad, Sir Geoffrey?"

"Of course they are."

"Wanted as soldiers more than they be wanted on the land?"

The Squire frowned. He had not weighed the pros and cons of a question hardly raised as yet even by far-seeing men.

"Lord Kitchener asks for them."

"I be afeard they'll hang back. 'Tain't easy to believe that us is at war. My Alferd be doing wonnerful well; trade stimulated as never was."

"I hear that Alfred is engaged to be married. Tell me all about it."

At such moments the Squire was at his best, keenly interested, avid for details, always ready to assume sponsorial obligations for the unborn, and promising five pounds if the little strangers appeared in couples. Mrs. Yellam spoke of Fancy.

"Bless my soul! She opened the Vicarage door to me this morning. A very pretty girl, on the thin side, but modest and intelligent. I shall congratulate her. Your Alfred is a very sterling fellow. He deserves the right sort of wife. By the way, we shan't want him. You can tell him so from me."

Mrs. Yellam said gravely:

"Alferd be my only son, and I tells him that others should go first."

"Um! What does he say to that?"

"Nothing—not a word."

"Well, Susan, I want Alfred to help me. As a carrier he is constantly meeting young men and young women. Let him talk to both."

"Yes, Sir Geoffrey. Alferd be a very forcible man, wi' plenty o' brave words and thoughts. Certainly this war be a marrer-stirring affair. I hopes as how Master Lionel be enjoyin' good health, and his dear lady?"

Sir Geoffrey chuckled.

"Captain, Susan, Captain. And only yesterday, I remember, he came sneaking in here, always sure of a bull's-eye." He glanced at his watch. "Time, confound it, is always hurrying on. I'm due at the Home Farm.

Before I go, one word in your faithful ear. It will travel no further for the present, hey?"

"You knows that, Sir Geoffrey."

They both stood up, a fine couple. The Squire patted Mrs. Yellam's substantial shoulder. Then he lowered his jolly voice:

"You asked about Mrs. Pomfret. After Christmas I am expecting the sort of present I want badly. You understand——?"

"Lard bless 'ee, Sir Geoffrey, and her too. 'Tis gert news."

"Isn't it? But mum's the word!"

He went on to the Home Farm, whither we need not follow him. But it may be added, incidentally, that the translation of Benoni Fishpingle from the position of butler at Pomfret Court to the more responsible post of Bailiff had worked greatly to the Squire's advantage and happiness. He returned home to luncheon in reasonably high spirits, having prodded the sides of many fat bullocks. He found Lady Pomfret on the terrace facing the park. From her face he divined instantly that something of importance had happened. She came up to him, with her slow, measured walk, holding out a telegram. It was from Lionel.

"Expect Joyce and me to-night. I go to France this day week."

CHAPTER VIII

RECRUITING

THE Squire's lecture was an immense success. The village school-house overbrimmed with his "people." With a big blackboard behind him, and chalk in hand, the lecturer talked simply and convincingly upon a subject at that time unfamiliar to his audience, a subject vital to any understanding of military movements. He explained the nature of platoons, companies, battalions, brigades, divisions and army corps. He presented, in short, an army in being. Loud applause greeted this first half of the lecture. The second half was devoted to the urgent cause of recruiting, and was not, perhaps, quite so enthusiastically acclaimed. The Squire, abandoning chalk and blackboard, thrust his hands in his pockets, and spoke trenchantly. We need not chronicle what he said. Men like him, all over the country, used the same arguments, almost exactly the same words. Such speakers forgot what had been said by Tweedledum and Tweedledee during the piping times of peace. Men and women, herded together, were invited to scrap the slow judgments and convictions of their lives. They had been assured again and again by politicians of variegated complexions that a mighty navy was fully adequate to defend our Empire against attack. Need it be added that such assurance, embodying as it did the accumulated wisdom and experience of generations, could not be cast incontinently as rubbish to the void. English

politicians—using the word in the strongest antithesis to statesmen—have never realised the temper of the country towards themselves, the curious and striking indifference of the average man, engrossed in his own avocation, to any policy that he has not the wits or leisure to assimilate thoroughly. The confidence of this average man in the government of the moment has always been poignantly touching, a confidence stolidly based upon a belief in the fundamental common sense of the nation as a whole. Upset that belief, and the average man becomes at once helplessly befogged.

After the Squire had spoken, old Captain Davenant said a few words in a more Cambyses' vein. Unhappily, the Captain lacked the geniality and persuasiveness of Sir Geoffrey. He believed in the choleric word, snapped out viciously. He spoke as he had often spoken in the barrack-yard, or in the hunting-field when some heavy-witted yokel had headed a fox. Probably he was shrewd enough to realise that this fox of recruiting might be headed, and governed himself accordingly. The Captain read the lessons on Sunday in the same peremptory tones, raising a rasping voice and glaring at the congregation—a very mirth-provoking performance. Uncle embodied the Nether-Applewhite verdict on such readings of the Scriptures:

" 'Tis a rare lark to hear 'un!"

Fancy and Alfred attended the lecture together, and Alfred accompanied his sweetheart to the Vicarage *au clair de la lune*. They had sat at the back of the schoolhouse amongst the younger people, and had listened attentively to sundry comments. Alfred, of course, accepted as gospel whatever the lord of so goodly a manor might be gracious enough to say. Being a carrier, and

passing daily through many manors, he had made obvious comparisons between his Squire and others to the advantage of Sir Geoffrey Pomfret. Remember, also, that as yet, although he kept silence on the point, he had not considered the possibility of England wanting him, a widow's only son, actively engaged in the prosecution of a business vital to the needs and necessities of a prosperous village. He hadn't a doubt in his mind, after listening to a burning harangue, that the younger men ought to down tools of peace and shoulder rifles at the word of command. Some of the half-whispered comments disturbed him.

"Are they cowards?" he demanded of Fancy.

"Oh, I can't think that, Alfie."

"You heard them growling like a lot of cantankerous hounds. I'd a strong notion to speak my mind, I had. 'Twas lucky for them that Uncle Habakkuk was sitting quiet and peaceful amongst the quality. I'll be bound he picked up a shilling or two, being the happy father of the hero. George, pore soul, stands higher than I ever expected to see him. 'Tis a sad pity the boy ain't able to hear the brave words as was said to-night by Squire and Captain. He's standing on a giddy pinnacle, to be sure, and I mind me, in cricket-field, how he'd shut both eyes when a ball came at his legs. I see him like that, quavering, on the field of battle."

Alfred chuckled. Fancy squeezed his arm, whispering fears not for George Mucklow, but for a better man:

"Alfie, please don't joke about that."

"Ah, well, Fancy, 'tis a fact that many of our boys are like George. Shifting manure's their proper job, and they do that so slow that I get weary watching 'em. Young Master Teddy is the real right sort. What he's

done, giving up a grand position, fills me nose-high with pride. And too little was said about him,—a very notable oversight."

"That was because Mr. Teddy is quality."

"You're right, my pretty maid. Are you aware, Miss Broomfield, that your fingers are playing the piano on my ribs?"

Love-making put to flight the less agreeable theme.

Mrs. Yellam and Jane Mucklow went home side by side. Jane, as the mother of the hero, maintained an aggressive silence. Susan Yellam said, with a faint inflection of interrogation:

"You be a proud 'ooman to-night, Jane?"

"You be wrong, as usual. I bain't nothing of the sart."

"Squire and old Captain spoke up so handsome about your Garge."

"Be I the old fool they takes me for? 'Twas soft soap, Susan, ladled out in a big spoon; flimflam I calls it. Habakkuk can ha' the pride, and welcome. He be fair swollen wi' that and ale as Garge is payin' for."

"I listen to no ill talk about my brother, Jane."

"Then you'd better walk wi' some one else, Susan Yellam. You sees God A'mighty's hand i' this; I don't."

She stamped along home in a silence Mrs. Yellam was too wise to break. Jane was a Christian and a churchgoer. But chronic dyspepsia seemed to have affected her conscience and principles.

She had predicted aright. At the *Sir John Barleycorn* Uncle was drinking much ale paid for, indirectly, by the hero of the hour. The gaffers and married men, including George's married brothers, listened approvingly. Uncle "understudied" the Squire as he addressed his

friends, thrusting his hands into his pockets and standing very upright.

"'Twas a notable evening, neighbours, but not a thing fresh to me, you understand? Me and Squire went over his so heart-stirrin' remarks two days ago, and me and old Captain had talk together this very marning. Far be it from me to say as they used my own words egzactly; I bain't a scollard, although I can an' do hold me own wheresomedever I finds myself. And I tell 'ee, just as Squire did to-night, 'tis our duty to cry 'Forrard' and keep on a-hollerin' so long as breath be left in our dear bodies. We got to jine in the hunt, boys, and roll our big buck over in open. I means, some way, to be in at death, and 'twould be a grand privilege to slit his royal throat. I tell 'ee, one and all, that the eyes o' the world be on Nether-Applewhite."

Uncle drank some ale, amidst much applause. An old gaffer piped up:

"Neighbours and true friends, this be a wondersome time, but I makes bold to say that we country fellers bain't properly esteemed in Lunnon town. I minds me when I jined what they called a deppitation to that gert city. I'd no stomach to go along, seein' as I'd no better clothes than I stands up in to-day. But I was outtalked, sonnies, as has happened to me by my own wife, time and time agen. We marched very proper down such a noble street as I'd reckoned might be found in Kingdom Come and nowheres else. And marchin' along so proud and joyous as never was, a tremenjous, red-faced man, a-settin' top side of a 'bus, wi' the reins in his hand, sings out: 'Halt!' Well, neighbours, we comes to a full stop, a-lookin' up at he, and, dang me, if he don't ask a very ridic'lous and shameless question."

The old man paused solemnly, looking about him. Some had heard the story before; one of the others said curiously:

"Whatever did he say?"

"He says this, sonnies, loud and clear: 'Tell me this,' he says, 'how do they keep the crows off the wheat when you fellers comes to town?' Neighbours, they was his words. And it struck me all of a heap as we wasn't, so to speak, properly esteemed in Lunnon town; and, more, 'tis hard to believe that what Habakkuk Mucklow here says is true. There be too much i' the world, neighbours all, for it to be gapin' at we."

Uncle felt that he had overstrained a figure of speech. But he dealt faithfully with his aged interrupter.

"What did 'ee up and reply to 'un, Granfer?"

The old gaffer gazed around.

"Ah-h-h! I says nothing at the time, Habakkuk Mucklow, but a very forcible remark comes into my mind just one week too late, when I was makin' spars in Hollywell Wood. I could ha' downscrambled 'un. 'Twas in the month o' November that we marched so gay adown that there Regency Street. And in November ther bain't no wheat to keep crows off. 'Twas a shameless and very ignerunt remark."

He cackled joyously as a good Samaritan refilled his glass. William Saint, feeling cautiously the pulse of his customers, hazarded a remark:

"The likely young fellers sat together at the end of the room, and they kept together afterwards. I see none of them here with us to-night. What does that mean?"

"I'll tell 'ee," replied Uncle promptly, "and in duty bound, being so moral a man, I means to tell Squire tomorrow marning. They be afeard, as my Garge was,

till I talked to 'un. Such talk as mine, soul-stirrin', upliftin' words, be wanted bad in Nether-Applewhite. The young fellers has got to fight for they as brought 'un into this wicked world. I fought in my time, as you all knows."

"Where?" asked William Saint.

Uncle replied scornfully:

"Never you mind where, Willum Saint. I can fight still, let me tell 'ee. If you doubts that, take off your coat and come wi' me to stable-yard."

William Saint declined politely the invitation.

"Why, Uncle, I meant no offence. We all want to fight the Germans, not to quarrel amongst ourselves. You have a glass o' ale with me."

Harmony was restored. Those present, who could hardly be expected to fight, agreed cordially that others must do the job for them. The youngsters needed encouragement.

"Wi' the end of a boot," concluded Uncle.

The lecture had taken place at seven. At nine the port circulated round Sir Geoffrey's mahogany. Hamlin was present and Lionel Pomfret. How sadly one recalls the chatter of those early days, the high hopes, the confidence that Might would crumble away against Right, the belief in the steam-roller—Russia. On paper, a swift result seemed assured. The Squire had thrown off London vapours. His own words had intoxicated him. He admitted that recruiting might hang fire in villages like Ocknell, but not amongst *his* people. Lionel backed him up. Lady Pomfret and Joyce said nothing. The Parson hoped that it would be so. When Sir Geoffrey had said everything to be said, twice over, he turned as usual to his wife for an approving nod strangely withheld.

"Well, my dear Mary, you agree with me?"

"About the necessity of getting men—yes. But I am not so sanguine as you, Geoffrey, about the patriotism in our village."

"Bless my soul!"

"I think Mr. Hamlin shares my apprehensions."

"I do," admitted the Parson gravely.

Lady Pomfret continued gently:

"I was talking, this afternoon, with Susan Yellam. She looks ahead. She faces facts, as we do. But she knows the village better than we do."

"My dear——!"

"I have been talking, too, with Ben."

"So have I, Mary; so have I."

Lady Pomfret smiled.

"Are you quite sure, Geoffrey, that you have been talking with Ben, and not at him? He is too courteous to interrupt you and too kind to contradict you."

"What does old Ben say to you?"

"What Susan Yellam says. The villagers, generally, believe that our present army and navy can beat a world in arms against us. You disabused them of that this evening, but Captain Davenant undid some of your stitches."

The Squire fumed a little.

"The old boy let them have it straight from the shoulder."

"Exactly. Personally, I deplore such methods."

"Sheep have to be yapped into the fold."

"I wonder if Mr. Hamlin thinks so?"

Thus challenged, Hamlin spoke—tentatively.

"I have never been able to regard men and women as animals. I admit a superficial similarity. Dogs are

nearest to us, but what an Atlantic stretches between us and them! Would any training turn a Pekinese into a pointer? Or a pug into a greyhound? But you can train any child, of any nationality, into what you reasonably please, provided always that you are dealing with a sound mind in a sound body. Sheep, under certain conditions, have to be yapped into folds, because they are sheep. The Prussian system yaps men into the ranks. I would sooner try other methods."

The Squire inclined his handsome head.

"Try your own methods, Hamlin, and good luck to you."

He answered quietly: "I shall try them next Sunday."

"You don't say so? From the pulpit?"

"Why not?"

"I approve with all my heart."

For the moment it rested there. Lionel began to talk of his coming campaign. The elder men and both the women, wife and mother, listened to his young, eager voice. How keen he was! How sure of himself and of his men, particularly the men. He talked persistently of Mr. Thomas Atkins, of his artful divagations in peace and his whole-souled valour in war. Hamlin reflected that it was good to listen to such talk, good to be young and valiant, at such a time, good even to die, if the supreme sacrifice were demanded, clean of limb and mind, leaping joyously upward, unfettered by disease or vice, *fit*—to use the boy's own word—for the greatest adventure of all.

He heard his own boy speaking, just such another! Britain had thousands of them, the fine flower of careful training, of a courtesy constantly exercised, of a courage sharpened to finest edge by the grindstone of

games and sports, of an intelligence not quite so keenly tempered, but alert enough in moments of stress, of a "morale" which nothing could dismay.

Surely they would be invincible?

When Lionel waxed anecdotal, Hamlin's thoughts wandered to the women. He had been a stalwart champion of the "Cause," till the militant suffragettes took to smashing windows and smacking policemen. One effect of the war, and no inconsiderable national asset, was the subsidence of these tempestuous petticoats, never to flutter again, so he hoped. From women this essentially virile parson had always expected and exacted great things. The true prosperity of any country, so he held, flowed from them and culminated in them. He had recognised, even at college, their immeasurable potentialities—a favourite word of his. To ignore their claims, politically, he contended in and out of print, was a colossal blunder. But, quite apart from the granting or withholding of female suffrage, he desired ardently to see women doing intelligently and thoroughly the work peculiarly their own, whether as matrons or spinsters. The death-rate amongst babies appalled him; the physique of young girls overworked in over-crowded, over-heated factories and shops roused this austere parish priest to fever-heat. He had marvelled at the astigmatic insight displayed by sincere statesmen and philanthropists, an insight ludicrously so-called, which overlooked women as the mightiest lever to raise and regenerate a nation.

And now, in the dim twilight of a world in gloom, he perceived a beacon steadily shining. The women would have their opportunity. One could adumbrate triumph or disaster by the effort, sustained or otherwise, made by them. The men would play their part, if the

inspiration of the women lay behind them. And in the inevitable dislocations of all human enterprise, both during and after the war, he beheld women stimulating the men either upward or downward, for good or ill, according to the spirit which burned within them.

He gazed at Lady Pomfret and his daughter Joyce, as their eyes dwelt upon the son and husband about to sail for France. He could guess what sensibilities lacerated their hearts. Outwardly, each remained calm. They would be so when the moment of parting came, speeding their warrior on his way with smiles, keeping back the tears till he was out of sight.

Hamlin walked home across the park, and let himself into the Vicarage with his latch-key. It was past eleven, and, to his surprise, Fancy had not gone to bed. As she lit his candle he chided her with the touch of testiness which had ceased to frighten her.

She said quickly:

"I wanted to see you, sir."

"See me at nearly midnight? What about? Surely to-morrow morning would do?"

"I wanted to sleep well to-night."

Without a word, he led the way into his study, and lighted two more candles.

"Sit down," he commanded. "You look tired."

"I feel excited like, sir."

He examined her more attentively, noticing the dilation of her pupils, so marked as to alter her expression. Big black eyes seemed to be burning out of a white face, but he attributed this seeming pallour to an ill-lit room.

"What excites you, Fancy?"

"I sat with Alfred Yellam at the back of school-house amongst the young fellows."

"Well?"

"Before Alfred left me, he told me to tell you, sir, that the young fellows was not too well pleased with what Captain Davenant said. Alfred was real vexed at their remarks. He thought you did ought to know."

"I'm much obliged to Alfred for a timely hint. But couldn't this have kept till the morning?"

"There's something else, sir."

"Out with it!" He smiled more encouragingly.

"After Alfred went, Molly told me as everybody in village was saying as how George Mucklow's father *made* him go, and that upset the other young men . . . And then . . ."

Her soft voice faltered and died away.

"And then . . .?"

"Molly and me fell to talking about Mr. Edward."

The sympathy in her voice was almost too much for the Parson. He shaded his eyes with his hand. She continued in a lower tone:

"Excuse me, sir, for asking you something, but I do want to know so bad.".

"Ask your question, Fancy."

"Did you tell Mr. Edward to go?"

"No."

"Ah! He wanted to go, and you didn't raise a finger to prevent him. If you had, maybe he'd have stayed."

"I—I don't think so."

The Parson's voice was not too steady. How sorely he had been tempted to raise that finger none would ever know. Fancy went on, breathlessly:

"Molly and me thinks that those who can least be spared may have to go, if—if the others hold back."

"I see. You are thinking of your Alfred?"

He lowered his hand, looking straight at her.

"If you please, sir. He be terrible put out at the others hanging back."

"I give my opinion for what it is worth, Fancy. In these deep matters none can speak for another. I do not presume to speak for Alfred. But Lord Kitchener, if he were here, would assure you that Alfred is certainly not needed yet, nor likely to be for a long time."

"Thank you, sir. That does hearten me. But, if he should want to go, and if—if he left it to me, what should I do? What ought I to do?"

Her big eyes were flaming with interrogation. The Parson dared not temporise with her. All his thoughts concerning women seemed to have become focussed on this individual case. All that the finest gentlewomen in the Empire were feeling expressed itself poignantly from the mouth of his parlourmaid. All his convictions concerning the potentialities of the soul became fortified. They burst suddenly into full flower. Yet he answered curtly, distrustful of sentiment when tremendous issues were at stake.

"You will tell him, Fancy, to act according to the dictates of his own conscience."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you mean that you will tell him that, regardless of your own feelings?"

"Yes, sir."

She got up, begging his pardon for keeping him out of bed. As he rose from his chair, he wondered what he could say to comfort her; some word of solace that might

woo sleep to her tired brain. They went together into the small hall. He took her hand.

"Have courage and faith. Pray that these may be vouchsafed to you and to all of us. Something tells me that you have both already. And if so, Fancy, it is well with you. Good-night."

"Good-night, sir."

CHAPTER IX

PARSON'S METHODS

NEXT day, immediately after breakfast, Sir Geoffrey summoned his two footmen and the odd man, so called because he does odd jobs in a big establishment and works harder for less pay than any other servant except, possibly, the scullery-maid. The first footman, Alfred Rockley, had married recently his cousin, Prudence, and, for the moment, the Squire regarded him as ineligible for service elsewhere. Charles, the second footman, was held by the Squire to be an oaf, sadly in need of barrack-yard discipline; the odd man had been taken from the Home Farm, and felt more at home in a barn than in the pantry.

They had attended the lecture of the previous evening.

Sir Geoffrey marshalled them in front of him, as he sat at his desk, and said genially:

"Now, Alfred, what do you think about joining up?"

The gallant fellow answered promptly:

"I'm ready to enlist with Captain Pomfret, Sir Geoffrey."

"So he told me, and it warmed the cockles of my heart. But you have a wife and——"

"Somebody else coming, Sir Geoffrey," added a true son of Nether-Applewhite.

"Yes, yes; a hint of that reached me, and I was much pleased. Babies, b'Jove, ought to command premiums

nowadays. Under the circumstances, Alfred, you can go back to the pantry. Single men must march first."

Alfred thanked the Autocrat, and withdrew. Charles happened to be the Squire's godson, and not a credit to his sponsor. Sir Geoffrey stared at his bovine face, now exhibiting a grin which might be seen at funerals and on all momentous occasions, a grin indicating nervousness and apprehension. If Sir Geoffrey could have looked through a very massive desk, he would have reprimanded Charles for standing on one foot and scratching his calf with the other.

"What do you propose to do, Charles?"

"I be thinking, Sir Gaffrey."

"Good. I want my people to exercise such thought as God has given to 'em. What conclusion have you come to—hey?"

"Mother don't fancy me going for a soldier."

"Possibly not. But this is a case for your conscience, not for your mother's fancy."

He spoke with increasing testiness.

"I be thinking, Sir Gaffrey," he repeated, with a still broader grin.

"Very well. Off with you! Think hard for the next twenty-four hours, and I'll see you again."

"Yas, Sir Gaffrey."

Charles withdrew, still grinning, and joined Alfred in the pantry, where he used encarmined language which provoked a rebuke from the middle-aged butler who had stepped into Fishpingle's shoes.

Sir Geoffrey eyed the odd man.

"What have you to say, my lad?"

"I ain't going to the wars, I ain't."

"Oh, you ain't going to the wars? Why not?"

"Because I'm quite satisfied with my place, sir."

"By the way, what's your name?"

"William Busketts."

"To be sure. Unmarried?"

"I'm walking out with Jemima Pavey, a very respectable young woman."

"What does Jemima Pavey say about it?"

"She thinks with me, sir. Most of us think the same, as we ain't ready to go to furrin' parts. If the Kayser invades Old England, I'm ready to shoulder gun, stand behind a tree, as brave as my neighbours, and take a true shot at 'un."

Sir Geoffrey stared at him. Did all the young men in his beloved village think this? And, if so, how was Authority going to deal with such a lot of damned fools? He said slowly:

"Has it occurred to you, my lad, that if able-bodied men like you refuse to enlist willingly, they will be made to do so? Willy-nilly——!"

"Ah-h-h, you're talking of conscription, sir. Old England won't never stand that. 'Tis devilish Proosianism, so they tell me."

"Who has told you that? Answer me!"

"I have heard William Saint say so."

Sir Geoffrey suppressed an oath. That William Saint, a former servant of his own, a tenant, a trusted friend, b'Jove! should so poison men's minds at such a time seemed incredible. If this were true, the world was indeed upside down. He fidgeted in his chair; his face flushed; wrath bubbled within him. He began to despair of his fellow-countrymen. However, he choked down his rising rage and said freezingly:

"You can go, sir."

"Where to?"

"Back to your work for the present."

William Busketts retreated, slightly moithered, but more at ease. He had expected an explosion, followed by the "sack."

Sir Geoffrey leaned back in his chair, sorely discomfited. It would be pleasant to record that happier fortune awaited him in his stables, in his gardens, and at the Home Farm; but truth will leap from her well on rare occasions. Out of all the young men interviewed upon this memorable morning, young men more or less dependent upon the will and whim of their interlocutor, only one promised to enlist forthwith. The others touched their caps, bobbed their heads, and professed themselves willing to do anything except bear arms for their country.

Luncheon at Pomfret Court, accordingly, was not a very cheery meal. The Squire sat silent and abstracted; the troubles in his brain upset his appetite.

In the afternoon, he called upon Captain Davenant, whom he found apoplectic with indignation. The Captain had a modest establishment, but he had discharged two men who—so the Captain affirmed—preferred to guzzle ale when a unique opportunity for sticking pig was held out to them.

"Country's rotten," concluded the Captain. "It may be saved by the gentlemen, by God! sir, but not by our yokels."

The Squire protested against this, saying, mildly for him:

"Perhaps, Davenant, our methods are at fault."

"That be damned!" roared the Captain.

"Well, well, it's fairly obvious that so far our recruit-

ing campaign has not been an overwhelming success. Hamlin means to have a go at 'em on Sunday. I haven't a notion how he'll tackle the job, but there it is. What is your opinion of William Saint?"

"A very shifty fellow, Pomfret, with a face the colour of skilly. He licks your boots. I wouldn't let him black mind. By the way, I've promised Habakkuk Mucklow half-a-sovereign for every cove he collars."

"That we should have come to such a pass!"

"Light a fresh cigar, and we'll go to the stables. When I'm fed up with mankind, I always take a squint at my gees."

"So do I, Davenant. But they'll have to go, too.

"Mine are ready for 'em."

This talk took place in mid-September, at a moment when an astrologer, doing a roaring trade not far from Piccadilly Circus, predicted confidently that the final disappearance of the All-Highest would take place upon the twenty-fifth day of October, 1914! Many believed him. And the mere sight of our splendid regulars route-marching over country roads, singing "Tipperary" as they swung along, deepened in the hearts of those who beheld them the conviction that French's Army was quite sufficient to stem the Hun tide, and, later on, sweep it back to Berlin. The pacifist press was widely read by men who had never looked at a newspaper before.

Unspeakable atrocities had begun in prostrate Belgium. Some refused to credit them. Others shrugged their shoulders and remarked blandly that war was not five o'clock tea. Out of the seething mass of contradictions, affirmations, exaggerations and recriminations, men in the rural districts who could hardly read and write were invited to step forward and abandon the beaten tracks.

Can one blame them, to-day, that they shrank at first from a desperate plunge into the unknown?

Upon the following Sunday, Nether-Applewhite Church was crowded to the galleries.

All over the country, churches were filling up or emptying according to the virtue that emanated from the preachers of God's Word. One wonders whether ministers of the Gospel apply this numerical test to themselves. It is certain, however, that those, like Hamlin, whether in Church or Chapel, who laid aside for the moment merely Biblical exigesis and the expounding of doctrine and dogma, and concentrated spiritual and intellectual energies upon dealing faithfully with the problem of human conduct as affected by a catastrophic war, had no reason to complain that they addressed empty pews.

Captain Davenant read the Lessons as if he were declaiming the Riot Act. The good man believed that the young men present were shirking hounds to be rated and whipped up to their Master. Under the lash of his rasping voice, even Mrs. Yellam, louder in fervent response than usual, winced and frowned. The Parson, in his three-decker, wondered whether a discreet hint would serve to tone down the zeal of this militant Christian, who positively wallowed in the slaughters and comminations of the Old Testament. The Captain, as a stout upholder of Church and Crown, must be handled delicately; a dry old stick breaks so easily. Uncle saf with his wife in the Mucklow pew, half-way down the nave. He carried a high head, and thought of the half-sovereigns soon to be rattling in and out of his pocket. Jane sat beside him, sniffing audibly. Alfred Yellam and Fancy Broomfield were opposite to each other, with the aisle between them.

Hamlin ascended the pulpit.

He chose for his text a maxim of Bishop Berkeley:

"Where the heart is right, there is true patriotism."

The shuffling of skirts and occasional coughs soon died down. Sir Geoffrey, from his coign of vantage in the chancel, perceived with some astonishment that Hamlin had a script on the cushion in front of him. As a rule he preached without notes. The Squire inferred rightly that the Parson deemed his theme to be of such paramount importance that he distrusted the effect of one careless, unconsidered word. Hamlin, however, possessed long sight. He could read his typewritten sheets without lifting them. Few in the congregation were aware of them.

He began with the curt statement that the actual word "patriotism" is not to be found in the Bible. This challenged attention immediately. The Squire fidgeted. He considered that Hamlin had made a shockingly bad start. A weapon had been thrust into the hands of recalcitrants. This apprehension, however, vanished as the preacher set forth convincingly, in words that children could understand, the obsessing love of country, of the Promised Land, which informed and sustained God's Chosen People during forty weary years in the wilderness. With a swift transition, he passed to the New Testament, dwelling, with more insistence, upon the love that had inspired simple, obscure men to forsake home, country and kindred, to fight God's battles in new and strange countries. When he paused, before touching his real theme, he had the ears of his congregation. He indulged in no gestures, his familiar tones fell quietly. So far, what he had said was preparatory, novel neither in theme nor treatment. None knew better than he how sadly his parishioners

were lacking in imagination. His success, as a preacher, had not been gained by dealing with abstractions or by inviting ill-educated persons to transplant themselves to surroundings and conditions which the wisest of moderns find difficulty in apprehending. Hamlin believed in the personal appeal.

He leaned forward out of his pulpit, gazing keenly at the faces upturned to his.

"I am wondering," he said slowly, "how many of you young unmarried men will be here a few Sundays from now?"

He paused again. His voice was gentler:

"I am wondering, also, what the mothers and sisters and sweethearts of these young men are thinking to-day, and what part they mean to play—to-morrow." Then he said austerely: "Where the heart is right, there is true patriotism."

Many hearts began to beat faster, as he went on, picking his way, pausing again and again, but never faltering. The Squire, upright in his comfortable chair, became conscious of the man's grip upon everybody present, gentle and simple. He could see their tense faces.

"I have never doubted one great thing. I believe in the soul and its immortality. In God's sight all souls are equal, because they are part of Him. From birth that soul is struggling to inform the body, in all its functions. It never tires; it never despairs. I dare to affirm that it is most active when body and mind are fighting against it, spurning it, denying, perhaps, its very existence or power. I affirm, further, that this quickening spirit within us may be least potent to achieve its purpose when body and mind are stagnant, steeped in apathy,

content with the things of this earth, food, drink, clothes, money and—pleasure.

"Try to believe, for a moment, that your souls are omnipotently right. In the text I have chosen, Bishop Berkeley uses the word 'heart.' I take it that he meant mind. Are your minds right? Are they working in harmony with your souls? Each of you is called upon to answer that question in relation to this world-war, and what that war may demand of each of us. It is the duty of some of you to go, not grudgingly, not because pressure is brought to bear upon you, not because you want to pose before others as more valiant than they are, not for any selfish reason whatever, but in the same spirit which informed the apostles, men like yourselves, hard workers, absorbed, as you are, in their own affairs, who abandoned everything with one unswerving purpose before them—the regeneration of a world in pain.

"A great Cause is animating all of us.

"This war may inspire some of you to actions undreamed of in days of peace, to a valour which you cannot measure if you would, because the hour provoking it has not yet come. Sooner or later that hour comes to the greatest and the humblest. And the manner of our rising to it may shape anew our lives and other lives, and determine our progress here and hereafter. From the cradle to the grave, each of us carries a sleeping energy capable of immense expansion, which wakes when the great opportunity presents itself.

"Some of you, I daresay, are unconscious of this latent power. We don't expect much of a child, do we? A child eats and plays and sleeps. But children of the tenderest years have performed amazing, incredible deeds. Why? Because of this Divine fund of spiritual force.

And we who are past middle-age; how difficult it is to say, with any certainty, how early we began, resolutely, to exercise what is called the human will.

"I ask you again, are your hearts right? I repeat again that your souls are right. Obey the voice of conscience, and it will be well with you. It is the duty of some of us to stay here in Nether-Applewhite. I wish with all my heart that I could go, but I must stay. A very solemn obligation rests with the women. I have never doubted the immense influence consciously or unconsciously exercised by you women over men. Are your hearts right? Do you realise, thinking, as you must do, of your dependence upon your bread-winners, that you may be hindering instead of helping those whom you love; that, in urging them to stay at home, you may be taking from them an opportunity to rise to their full stature, never to be offered again?

"What does Bishop Berkeley mean by *true* patriotism?

"Are the Germans true patriots? Let us admit that they are passionate lovers of their Fatherland. But their patriotism would seem to be an insensate fury of self-interest, shrinking from no outrage to be inflicted on others, provided only that the material end be accomplished—world-dominion. I cannot bring myself to speak, before young women and children, of the atrocities deliberately wreaked upon helpless Belgians. They are so abominable that details are unprintable in clean newspapers.

"Is, then, their form of patriotism true?

"What form will your patriotism take? Will it be true, springing to life and strength, out of a right mind inspired by the soul; or will it pattern itself after the

Prussian model, concerning itself with material gain regardless of spiritual loss?

"Ask yourself these things.

"Before I close I want to say this. For many years I have worked amongst you, in sickness and in health, in prosperity and adversity, and your welfare is dear to me. Sometimes I have felt discouraged, acutely sensible of failure and disappointment. For many of you I have cherished ambitions, and some of these have been realised. And it is this which has sustained and fortified me in the dark hours which none can escape. What one can do may be done by another; not in the same way, perhaps, but in the same direction—upward and onward. I believe, with all the faith that is in me, that you will rise, with right and steadfast hearts, to meet this stupendous emergency. I am at your service. My house is open to you when I am in it. If you want counsel, if you feel perplexed, as you may well do, come to me, and together we will attempt to find a way. I shall not appeal to any one of you, personally."

The congregation filed out of the church. Many walked home in silence. Alfred Yellam booked no orders in the churchyard on that Sunday. Susan Yellam smelt no odour of baked meats as she passed the baker's. Uncle, after greeting them not so exuberantly as usual, said with conviction:

"A very moving and proper discourse. 'Tis strange that me and Pa'son do think just alike. I felt as I might ha' been preaching that upliftin' sermon myself. His motter be mine—upward and onward! He be counting on me to play my part, and I shan't disapint 'un."

His wife said tartly:

"There be one preacher you'll never disappoint, Habakkuk."

"You means Pa'son?"

"I means—yourself."

Uncle laughed, patting her shoulder.

"Old dear, I've heard 'ee make more foolish remarks."

Mrs. Yellam said no word about the sermon till the midday meal was over. When Alfred had lighted his pipe, she came and sat near him.

"Alferd?"

"Yes, Mother?"

"There be moments when Mr. Hamlin do soar, so to speak, high above me. I be a very unhappy 'ooman this day."

Alfred opened his mouth and left it open, gaping with amazement. The Parson's sermon had moved him to the marrow, particularly the references to the women, because he was well aware of the influence exercised over him by his mother and Fancy, the more percolating because he never admitted it except to himself. Nevertheless he knew that his mother was subject to moods and tenses which no ordinary man could conjugate. She held herself strictly to account upon matters affecting conduct, somewhat complacently aware that less robust spirits cited her as a model. Her cocksureness about others, oddly enough, accentuated pitifully her private opinion about Susan Yellam. From time to time Alfred alone was privileged to behold this strong woman self-shorn of her strength. He could remember well a terrible fortnight after Lizzie died, when Mrs. Yellam lay in bed and refused even his efforts to console her. The remembrance of her grim, set face came back to him now, as he stared mutely at her, wondering what he ought to say,

and miserably conscious that the situation lay far beyond him.

Why should his mother be unhappy?

Had he been a student of history, he might have reflected that Boadicea, possibly, ruled wisely everybody except herself.

Mrs. Yellam continued:

"I have the notion that Mr. Hamlin expects too much o' me."

"What a queer, upsetting idea!"

"I be asking myself if my heart be right. It bain't."

"Maybe 'tis your stomach, Mother."

"No, Alferd. I be no true patriot."

"Well, I never! If such a woman as you are is bogged down, where are we, I ask?"

"You be in the right path, Alferd. 'Tis some comfort to think o' that. Now, let me bide wi' my own thoughts. Fancy be waiting for 'ee. Be kind to the maid, Alferd, if so be as you find her, like me, down on beam ends after this marning's sermon."

"Fancy'll be all right, I wager."

"Maybe. I tell 'ee this: we women be fearfully and wonnerfully made—a puzzle to ourselves and all mortal men. That be a fact, my son. I knows this too hard for any man to understand. If you stayed on here wi' me, wi' the whole-souled notion o' comforting an unhappy 'ooman, I should wax peevish wi' 'ee. God forgive us! We be cruel to they we love, when life goes wrong wi' us."

Alfred wisely had a squint at his motor-'bus to hearten himself up, and then took the road to the Vicarage.

Mrs. Yellam cleared away the dinner-things and washed them up. It was too early, as yet, to expect visi-

tors. She went into the parlour and opened the big Bible, staring at Alfred's name and her own. She had rid herself of him cleverly. Had he stayed, she would have broken down. She wanted to make him swear to remain in Nether-Applewhite. She had made up her mind to do so that very morning. Every word spoken by the Parson seemed to be directed at her; his chance shafts quivered in the heart that was not right.

She closed the Bible.

CHAPTER X

FANCY'S ORDEAL

PARSON'S methods bore fruit. Within the week several young men came forward, and certain young women, on their own initiative, formed a small society to encourage enlistment. Uncle claimed two or three half-sovereigns from Captain Davenant to which, possibly, he was not entitled. The Captain raised a protest against one case, having specific information that female influence had been diligently at work. Uncle laughed.

"Ah-h-h! That be true, Captain. But 'twas me as talked first to the young 'ooman, training her, so to speak, and puttin' my brave words into her pretty mouth. But I bain't one to keer about money. Everybody knows that. I be working as never was for my whole Sovereign, King Garge, not for half 'uns."

Captain Davenant paid the extra half-sovereign. Uncle's disarming grin proved irresistible.

Ultimately, Nether-Applewhite did better than contiguous villages. In Ocknell, with an impoverished squire and a nonentity for a parson, no young men came forward during the first three months.

About Christmas, George Mucklow returned home on leave, hardly recognisable. Nether-Applewhite was impressed by his martial bearing, when he strode down the village street, cocking his head at a much-admired angle, with his buttons shining in the sun. Young Hamlin,

with a corporal's stripes upon his arm, had leave at the same time. George and he received an ovation, wandering in and out of the cottages, talking and laughing as if war were the greatest lark in the world. Recruiting was much stimulated. The girls liked to be seen with a "boy" in khaki.

Meanwhile, Lionel Pomfret had been with the gallant Seven Divisions, sharing their hardships and glories. He wrote home in good spirits, making light of what he had endured, but a postscript in a letter received in early December was illuminating.

"At present I feel that when I return to Nether-Applewhite I shall never want to leave it again. All the German prisoners taken by our men are fatly content. One chap, formerly a barber at Nottingham, told me that he'd been looking for us ever since he joined up!"

Perhaps the proudest moment of Lady Pomfret's life came to her when she visited a wounded Green Jacket at Netley, who had been in Lionel's company. The man said to her:

"During the retreat from Mons, my lady, the Captain kept up all our spirits, laughing at us and chaffing us. We loved him."

So far, Lionel had not been touched, but, much to the anxiety of his mother, he never mentioned his own health. She knew how delicate his lungs were. Would they stand the cruel rigours of the trenches in mid-winter?

She was now established as the Commandant of the Red Cross Hospital, and wore a red uniform which became her vastly well. For three months, preceding Christmas, wounded Belgians were cared for and entertained by the devoted band of women who rallied round the lady of the manor. Jane Mucklow cooked for the

wounded; Susan Yellam was installed as bottle-washer in chief. Sir Geoffrey would march through the Long Saloon and wonder where he was. All the beautiful furniture and porcelain had been put away. Nine cots on each side of the stately room stood side by side. In the centre was a large table covered with puzzles and paraphernalia for indoor games. At smaller tables the convalescents played interminably at cards, piquet and écarté. They amused each other very well, not so dependent upon their entertainers as the Tommies who succeeded them. One man sang beautifully; another wrote admirable verse. Before the war, the versifier had been on the staff of a Brussels newspaper. All these men were unanimous about one thing—an *idée fixe*. They hoped and prayed that they might never be asked to fight again. Some declared their intention of remaining for ever and ever in England. It was heart-breaking to listen to their accounts of ravished and pillaged Belgium.

Above them hung the famous French prints. Beautiful, laughing dames and exquisite cavaliers looked down upon bandaged heads and shattered limbs. The contrast never failed to strike Sir Geoffrey. His prints stood for life as he had known it, gay, easy, refined, cultivated, essentially aristocratic. Was the Old Order, which he loved, passing inexorably out of sight? Would life, after the war, cease to be leisurely and easy for the upper classes? Would the payment of a stupendous National Debt fall upon them? And, if so, how would it be met? Would a triumphant democracy divide up the big estates? Could they be run properly upon diminished rent-rolls?

He confronted these questions ill at ease inwardly. Outwardly, as he had assured his wife, he carried "a

stiff tail." The politeness of the Belgians oppressed him. If he came into the ward and addressed a man lying in bed, the poor fellow would struggle to sit up and salute him. One cheery-faced boy, with eight wounds, passed the time laughing and crying; then he would fall asleep, smiling in his sleep like a child.

But recruiting had been damped down by Authority, because housing and equipment were so short. Sir Geoffrey was not encouraged to stump the county—as he offered to do—and deliver his lecture. His old schoolfellow at the War Office gave him a hint:

"We want the men, but not too many at once."

In the village, women not engrossed with Red Cross work sewed feverishly upon shirts and pyjamas, and knitted comforters. The Squire examined some of the pyjamas, and exclaimed:

"Thank God! I don't have to wear them."

Shooting and hunting and football went on much as usual, to the amazement of our French Allies. Some of our cavalry regiments in France wanted to import a pack of hounds. The French Mandarins forbade it.

Early in January, a curt telegram from the War Office reached Sir Geoffrey, as he stood in the hall, after a day in his coverts, shooting cock-pheasants.

"Lionel Pomfret wounded, degree not stated."

Next morning, Sir Geoffrey hastened to London and to the War Office. No details were forthcoming. The men he saw were kind and sympathetic. Captain Pomfret might be badly wounded, but the odds were against that. The anxious father couldn't find out where his son was, or even where he was likely to be. He engaged rooms at a hotel and spent a wretched afternoon at his club. Twenty-four hours dragged themselves by. He

was wondering how much longer he could bear the strain, when the second telegram reached him.

"Arrived Southampton. Destination unknown. Love. LIONEL."

The Squire, you may be sure, shared these good tidings with many friends, who congratulated him warmly. Obviously, the wound must be light. Exasperations followed, thick and fast. Sir Geoffrey hurried to the War Office, and thence to the Admiralty, and finally to Waterloo, where, eventually, he had the joy of seeing his son step out of a train, with a much-bandaged head, but apparently fit and in the highest spirits. A bit of shrapnel had knocked him down, inflicting a superficial scalp-wound, which was healing rapidly. Across his overcoat was a perfectly-defined cut made by a bullet which had missed him and killed the man at his side. He shewed his father a scar upon his neck, where another bullet had grazed him. Lionel talked fast and fluently. He had been in innumerable small actions since Mons, and had seen whole regiments cut to bits.

His destination for the moment was a private hospital for officers in Belgrave Square. There his wound was dressed, and Sir Geoffrey talked persuasively to the Sister-in-charge and Surgeon, who, under pressure, allowed their patient to dine with his father quietly at a club.

Sir Geoffrey never forgot that dinner.

War, as soldiers see it, was brought vividly home to him by a young man who talked of indescribable horrors as if they were negligible. Everything was accepted by Lionel as part of the "show." The father listened, think-

ing of the pin-pricks which, since August, had so irritated his sensitive skin, and felt grievously ashamed of himself. But, in Lionel's place, with Lionel's amazing experience, he, too, was sensible that he would talk coolly. That was part of the tradition of the Service. Tremendous issues must be so faced.

He took his son back to Belgrave Square at half-past nine.

Lionel slept soundly. The Squire lay awake most of the night. Throughout dinner, he had suppressed his feelings. And on the threshold of the nursing-home, the father had found no other words than these:

"It's jolly to have you back again, old chap."

That was all, and, perhaps, enough.

In bed, the Squire had no inclination to sleep. He wanted to think things out. He wanted to adjust past and present conditions, to strike some happy mean between them. Could he interpret the significance of this never-ending slaughter? Lionel had told him of a German regiment pushing too far ahead, and annihilated, not a man left. That had been described, also, as a "show."

More—and worse—Lionel ridiculed the suggestion of an early peace. Kitchener was under the mark. The war was quite likely to last five years.

Five years!

Men such as his son, decent, quiet, sport-loving chaps, admitted with a laugh—with a laugh!!!—that the enemy was "hot stuff," and that attrition would determine the end—and nothing else.

Attrition.

He attempted to envisage what attrition meant where millions were engaged. Put the lot at twenty millions.

How many would perish? What Divine Purpose could be accomplished by such a holocaust?

But his boy was safe for the next few weeks.

Two days later he brought him back to Pomfret Court.

Lionel received a soul-warming reception from gentle and simple within and without a five-mile radius of his home. Apart from the young man's personal charm and good looks, he happened to be the first officer to return home wounded. The fact that the wound was not serious, that he treated it as a convenient peg upon which to hang three weeks' leave, made no difference. Indeed, it increased rather than diminished his influence in Nether-Applewhite so far as recruiting was concerned. His gay voice, his happy inconsequence, the vitality that radiated from him as he moved briskly from cottage to cottage, or rode up to talk to men working upon the property, achieved effects so far-reaching that possibly Hamlin was the only man in the parish able to measure them. The Squire and Davenant had appealed trenchantly for volunteers, using the time-worn arguments of Authority and believing sincerely enough that deaf ears might hear their message if it were shouted loud enough. The Parson, wiser man, had appealed to those same ears believing, with greater conviction, that noise and violence, veiled threats, bribery in any form, would defeat their ends. Right action, he contended, would come from within, at the persuasive, insistent call of conscience. Lionel Pomfret hit the trail —to use the Western expression—which wanders between the high road and the low. Looking at the gallant fellow, sitting erect on his horse, it seemed clear even to eyes dimmed by living in the twilight of unintellectual surroundings, that he impersonated something

which captivates the rural mind more than anything else—excitement. Lionel told the labourers, none of whom had been farther afield than Salisbury or Southampton, stories of France bubbling over with humour and high spirits. And if this light-heartedness had astonished his father, we can imagine what bewilderment it begat in simpler minds. Many of them realised that in holding back they were missing *fun!* One hardly dares to use such a word. But it burst, like a bomb, from the lips of a man who had been "out there," who had been "through it," who bore scars, and who laughed at them.

Many joined up; more held back.

Laugh as he did about everything that concerned his own adventures and misadventures, Lionel became intensely serious concerning the main issue, trembling still in the balance. Kitchener of Khartoum must have more and more men. Otherwise, the sacrifices made and the hardships endured by the splendid Seven Divisions would be in vain, and, ultimately, directly or indirectly, the enemy would triumph.

Charles, the second footman, and the odd man, enlisted within a week of Lionel's return home. Their places in the establishment were taken by maids.

Upon the first Sunday in February fill-dyke, Alfred Yellam walked out, as usual, with Fancy. She had noticed, during the Morning Service, that Mrs. Yellam's responses were not quite so fervent as usual, and the sermon, a good one, seemed to fail to hold Alfred's attention. Servant-maids are acute observers where their interests are concerned. They divine a frown before the master's forehead is wrinkled; they anticipate a harsh word before it is spoken by the mistress. Alfred

walked beside Fancy in silence. This, taken by itself, was not disturbing. The more privileged classes often wonder why humbler couples sitting upon benches in the parks, or walking aimlessly amongst the trees, appear to be so satisfied with a silence which they stigmatise as stupidity. If, on the other hand, curiosity led our Olympians to interrogate the more thoughtful of these couples, they might be astonished to discover that the never-ending chatter in our drawing-rooms provokes much the same indictment from those whom they regard as far below them. The shrill screams of laughter, the parrot-house babble, fox-trotting, and the bacchantic waving of arms bare to the shoulder are often summed up as—"monkey-shines." To men and women who work desperately hard throughout the week, the silences of Sunday steal unawares, lapping them to a rest which is real refreshment. Fancy, for example, loved to stroll beside Alfred, feeling his sturdy arm about her waist, and knowing from its convincing pressure that his thoughts were dwelling upon her as hers dwelt upon him, revelling in a future which would bring them closer together.

But, to-day, somehow, his silence was not so reassuring.

For the time of year, the weather happened to be mild. Spring was abroad in the land. Fancy heard her voice in the bleating of the new-born lambs; she beheld her in the snow-drops; Spring's sweet breath beat upon a pink cheek when the south-west breeze sighed in the yews and pine-tops.

And yet, misgivings assailed the maid.

They had walked from the Vicarage, through Nether-Applewhite, and past Mrs. Yellam's cottage whither they

would return for tea. Fancy had learnt to love the village with its general air of sleepy, comfortable prosperity. She would be perfectly content to live here all her days. Occasional jaunts to Sarum or to the exciting side-shows of Boscombe and Bournemouth could only serve to enhance the more solid charms of home. Alfred had spoken once, at the moment when they left the *Sir John Barleycorn* tavern behind them.

"Do you like William Saint, Fancy?"

"No."

"Why?"

"I don't know, Alfie. I ain't never spoken to him, nor him to me. 'Tis his face, I suppose."

"Mother thinks he's a danger to me."

"Gracious!"

"William moves with the times, a far-seeing man. And snug, with money in bank and credit, too. Mother says he's after my business. I got ahead by buying my motor-'bus. Yes—William Saint might have sneaked my good business. He knows folk far and wide, as I do. That's bread and cheese to a carrier. And he knows how to tickle 'em with pleasant words. That's cakes and ale."

He said no more. Fancy felt vaguely troubled. She had taken Alfred's profitable business for granted. Fellow-servants and villagers had assured her, with a sub-acid inflection underlying congratulation, that she was lucky indeed to have got so warm a man as the carrier. Like most of her class, she entertained nebulous ideas about how money was made, although she had been constrained all her life to use such money as came to her thriftily and with a very lively sense of its elusive attributes in slipping through careless fingers. The slow

building-up of a business had never engrossed her thoughts. But she knew well enough, poor child, how rapidly such a business may disintegrate, and fall to pieces. That calamity had been her father's bitter experience.

They followed the Avon, strolling leisurely up-stream till they reached a small covert much beloved by hunting-men because it always harboured a stout fox.

"Let's go in wood," said Alfred.

"Won't it be damp, dear?"

"I want to talk to you."

Her heart beat faster. Something was coming—What?

Alfred led the way to a hurdler's hut, a rough shed, where the lovers sat down upon a heap of dry chips. A delicious smell of bark filled the air. George Mucklow had worked here often, before he was dragooned into the Army. With the smell of bark, dominating it, rose the odour of damp earth, always so significant, bearing its double message. From earth we have come; to it we must return. Fancy's sensitive nose could detect yet another odour. An ancient coat, much soiled by time and weather, had been thrown upon the pile of chips. In an olfactory sense the coat was eloquent of labour, of long perspiring hours and all that such hours hold. Fancy's nostrils were not offended. But she refused to sit on it. Alfred, wearing his Sunday best, was not so particular.

He wasted little time in preliminaries. And he spoke with a geniality assumed, as Fancy guessed, for her benefit.

"The young Captain," he began, "has stirred us all

up with his pleasant tongue. Now don't jump! Let me tell my tale."

He told it simply. Upon the previous Friday, it appeared, Alfred had fallen into talk with the Pavey boys, who worked on a farm between Nether-Applewhite and Salisbury. The Paveys were reckoned by Sir Geoffrey to be stout specimens of sound breeding. Jemima Pavey, it may be recalled, "walked out" with William Busketts, the odd man. It is likely, therefore, that the enlistment of William affected profoundly Jemima's brothers, both single, both of military age. Alfred, urged on, no doubt, by Lionel Pomfret, had taken upon himself the task of persuading the Paveys to follow William to the wars. According to Alfred, a hot discussion had ensued. The Paveys were regarded by the Squire as sound in body but weak and plastic of mind. Wiser men than the Autocrat of Nether-Applewhite consistently underrated the intelligence of young men like the Paveys, abnormally acute when stimulated by self-interest. Ultimately, so Alfred said, the Paveys had twitted him offensively upon the fact that he preached what he did not practise. And, oddly enough, poor Alfred was not prepared for this sudden turning of tables. He, too, was single and of military age. The fact that he happened to be engaged in a lucrative business served to sharpen railing tongues. At long last, after much vituperation (as Alfred admitted) on both sides, the Paveys had delivered a momentous ultimatum. They pledged themselves to enlist at once, if Alfred agreed to join them. More, they were prepared to answer for half-a-dozen others. To gain time for thought, Alfred invited them to obtain some similar pledge from these others. And, before Service that morning, the pledge had been forth-

coming. In fine, if Alfred donned khaki, eight of the best would follow so striking an example. Alfred concluded pleasantly:

"You see, Fancy, that I'm up against it."

Engrossed with his own exciting narrative, he had failed to notice her. From the beginning of the tale to the end, she never moved. The impending sword had fallen upon her frail body, lacerating cruelly every fibre of her being. All fears, all sensibilities which from birth had differentiated her from more robust young women, sensibilities which dwelt upon things spiritual rather than material, sensibilities which had been further quickened by her father's unmerited misfortunes, constraining her early in life to envisage the future as likely to hold more pain than pleasure, these rose up and choked utterance. Had Alfred looked at her, at this poignant moment, his decision—not as yet reached—might have been different. He looked away from her, staring through the open side of the hut, seeing the rows and rows of trees, standing like soldiers, awaiting the inevitable axe.

Presently Fancy said quietly:

"Have you spoken to your mother? Does she know?"

Alfred turned, taking her hand. But the supreme moment had passed. Fancy was now herself again, or rather she had become what her will and conscience made her to appear—an outwardly calm young woman, who, having swiftly read her own soul, was seeking to read the soul of the man beside her.

Alfred answered hesitatingly:

"Mother's wonderful. I never quite understand her. I ain't said a word, but back of her dear mind is something."

"Are you going to tell her?"

Alfred squirmed a little, certain that Mrs. Yellam would oppose his going. And he could not reckon accurately what obedience he owed to a mother in such a matter. He said gently:

"Never mind that, Fancy. What do you say?"

He held her hand tightly, but sat beside her rigid as she was. Afterwards, again and again, she wondered what her reply would have been if her lover, at such a crisis, had appealed to her body instead of to her mind. If he had seized her in his arms, kissing her passionately, evoking a passionate response from her, exciting her physical senses, lulling to sleep her conscience, could she have resisted such an appeal?

It was not made. Did he deliberately leave her free to speak calmly, as he had spoken? Was he thinking of her? Was he thinking of his mother? Who could blame him if all thought were focussed upon himself? And his next words confirmed her suspicion that it was impossible for any man, at such a time, to wean consideration from issues so personal and so insistent.

"That's why I spoke to you about William Saint. If I go, Fancy, I must find a man to take my place, see? 'Taint likely as I'll find anybody who knows folk as I knows 'em. And if William Saint sneaks in, maybe I won't find what I leave when I come back."

He spoke very earnestly, gripping her hand. Her sympathy for him welled up, drowning all thoughts of self. Alfred had leapt to heights. She realised the extent of the sacrifice he might make. And she felt, instinctively, that the sacrifice would be made. A curious exaltation possessed her. Alfred had thrilled her soul. If he went, true patriotism, as Mr. Hamlin interpreted the elusive

word, would be behind his going. And he looked so stolid, dear man, so unconscious of the spiritual forces stirring within him.

She said impulsively:

"You mean to go, Alfie?"

"If you approve."

She drew a deeper breath. Then the decision rested with her. If she burst into tears, if she flung herself into his arms, if she whispered to him, blushingly, the arguments which come pat to any woman's tongue, when her happiness is at stake, he would stay. The burden laid upon her seemed greater than she could bear. Her withers were wrung. In her perplexity she lurched here and there, staggeringly. She caught at straws.

"And if your mother disapproves?"

"Ah-h-h! Maybe she will."

"But, if she does—? Answer me, Alfie. I be hanging on your words."

He said heavily:

"I ain't one for argument. I only know this, dear, if I go, others will go, too. And the men are wanted, so Captain Lionel says. And if he says so, 'tis so. I feel as I ought to go, if you approve. When it comes to Mother, I'm weak-kneed. If I leave her out, Fancy, 'tis because I know what's tearing her, the thought of the graves in churchyard. 'Tain't in Mother as 'tis in you, to stand hand in hand with me, and forget her dear self."

Desperately, she clutched at another straw.

"You may be right, Alfie, about Mr. Saint—I don't like him. I feel, someway, that he will do as you say, sneak in behind your back, and rob you of what you have worked so hard for. Could you stand that?"

" 'Twould be a rare twister, Fancy. But the men are wanted."

He spoke with no fire, no enthusiasm. The men were wanted. That, apparently, had become an obsession. Dared she temporise any further? Was this the opportunity, never to be presented again, of which Mr. Hamlin had spoken?

"If you feel like that, Alfie, you must go. I—I couldn't lift a finger to hold you back. I am proud," her voice faltered, "to belong to such a man."

The victory was won.

Reaction followed quickly. They clung to each other. Fancy cried, knowing that tears would lighten her heart. Alfred kissed them away. He set himself, resolutely, the task of cheering her up. The war might be over before he was ready to serve in France. William Saint had his own business. One that exacted constant attention. No doubt a trusty fellow could be found to drive the 'bus.

At tea, no trace of the storm could be discerned on their smiling faces.

But Mrs. Yellam knew.

CHAPTER XI

THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS

ALFRED Yellam enlisted. But only seven out of the eight other young men enlisted with him. To the amazement of Nether-Applewhite, Adam Mucklow, a married man, took the place of the shirker. And this was not under pressure from Uncle, although he tried (and failed) to "touch" old Captain Davenant for another half-sovereign. Possibly the sight of the effulgent George—a younger brother not held in the highest esteem by Adam—had its effect; possibly, also, Adam had been swept off his large feet by Lionel Pomfret; possibly, again, Hamlin's good seed may have sprouted in somewhat thin soil. Motives must not be analysed too closely.

Susan Yellam and Jane Mucklow said nothing. Susan may have realised that protest would be wasted; Jane, probably, was just as shrewd. Each woman cherished a bitter grievance, hiding it grimly from inquisitive eyes. Each read the heart of the other, and still remained silent. Each, however, was proud to be the mother of a valiant son. Mrs. Yellam never knew that a tremendous decision had been left to Fancy. She took for granted that Fancy felt as she did, and the pale, anxious face of the girl confirmed this conviction. Alfred, you may be sure, made Fancy promise to keep silence concerning what passed in the fox-covert. To her dying

day let the mother believe that the son had acted "on his own," without consulting another. Fancy sighed and consented. What did it matter? What did anything matter now that Alfred was going? During these last few days, the spiritual part of her seemed dead. Triumph appeared to have killed it! But her will prevailed over the weakness of the flesh. Alfred must see no more tears. Her smile was the most pathetic memory which he took with him from Nether-Applewhite.

Before "joining-up," he gave two presents to the women he loved. To his mother he brought a wire-haired fox-terrier, pure white save for one round black spot between the ears and an oval black spot upon the loins. The dog was nine months old and clean thoroughbred, the son of a famous prize-winner. Alfred paid five pounds for him. Mrs. Yellam was profoundly moved; and the dog seemed to acclaim her as mistress at sight, jumping into her ample lap and licking her hand.

"What shall we call him, Mother?" asked Alfred.

Mrs. Yellam studied the dog's lineaments. His eyes sparkled as shrewdly as her own.

"He looks wonnerful wise," she said. "Wise as Solomon, he be."

"Then we'll call him—Solomon."

And it was so. Solomon—soon abbreviated into "Sol"—wagged his short tail approvingly.

To Fancy Alfred presented a bicycle, and with it these words:

"Vicarage is nigh three-quarters of a mile from Mother's cottage. I want you to see Mother whenever 'tis possible. I know her. She'll keep herself to herself, thinking her own thoughts, and they'll be hard thoughts, Fancy. You'll help to soften 'em, dear, won't you?"

"Indeed I will."

"Parson'll let you off, afternoons, for an hour, maybe; and the bike'll make all the difference. I see you nipping down in no time."

"I shall love that, if Mr. Hamlin can spare me."

Alfred laughed gaily.

"I've spoken a word to him. And a kinder gentleman, in spite of his coldish face, I never met. He shook hands with me, and told me you should have a whiff of fresh air."

And thus it was cosily arranged.

To find a responsible, capable fellow to take his place as village carrier, and to drive the precious 'bus, was not so easy of achievement. But this, too, was managed through Mr. Hamlin. Alfred said uneasily:

"I ask you, sir, to keep an eye on William Saint."

"William Saint?"

"He's crafty as any fox, sir, and a rare pusher. Mother fears that he may push himself into my good business."

Hamlin promised to bear this possibility in mind. Then Alfred, with groanings and travailings, delivered himself of the last burden on his mind:

"I'm sore troubled about Mother."

Hamlin held his tongue.

"She's taking this hard, but not a word does she say, not one. She thinks, I know, that God Almighty has forsaken her, pore soul. Such a mort o' trouble as she's had, too. My going seems the last straw. 'Twouldn't be so bad, if all the young men had gone first."

"I can imagine what she feels, Alfred. This is a time of sore trial to all of us, and, perhaps, the strongest suffer most. I will do what I can to comfort her, but

I can do so little. In all my life I have never felt before how cheap mere words are. Now, go your way with a glad heart. Put these anxieties from you, hopefully, and so you will do your duty the better. God bless you!"

Alfred duly departed.

Before Lionel returned to France, the Squire's ardent desire was granted. He became the happy grandfather of a stout boy, with his sire's blue eyes and clear skin —a ten-pounder!

To celebrate this glorious event, the Squire built a shrine and dedicated it to the men of Nether-Applewhite who had answered the call to arms. It took the form of a fountain, with a granite trough for watering horses. Inside the fountain might be found a great slab of white marble with the names of the young fellows, in order, inscribed upon it in dull gold lettering, a very notable monument, as Uncle observed. It stood below the Church, opposite to the *Pomfret Arms,* in an open space where roads branched. Folk, from far and near, came to look at it.

From the recruiting point of view, the fountain, as was generally admitted, furnished inspiration together with pure water to thirsty souls.

When Lionel went back to France, a drab pall of apathy settled again upon the village. Mrs. Yellam spent every morning at Pomfret Court, returning to her cottage after the mid-day meal, which she helped to serve. Fancy would dash down to see her after five o'clock tea. Within six weeks Alfred appeared in khaki, with forty-eight hours' leave. He had joined an infantry regiment, somewhat to his regret, for he had a leg for a kilt,

and remembered the resplendent appearance of "No Account Harry."

"The Highlanders were in my mind, Mother. I'd a notion to enlist with them, but 'twas not to be."

Susan Yellam said reflectively:

"I prefer the Grannydeer Guards, to they Seafarin' Highlanders, Alfie."

"Ah-h-h! I might have gone for a horse-soldier, but when they told me 'twould be my pleasure and duty to keep my horse cleaner than myself, I thought twice about it. 'Tis a hard life, dear, but I feel wonderful strong, with a tremendous stomach for my victuals."

His appearance delighted Fancy.

They were photographed together, arm in crook, travelling to Salisbury as passengers in Alfred's 'bus, which provoked many jests. But when Alfred went back to duty the corners in two hearts seemed more empty than before.

Meanwhile, Tommies had taken the place of Belgians at Pomfret Court, much to the satisfaction of the maids in the village. They were an amazing set of fellows, so the Squire decided, guests after his own heart, always ready to crack a joke, grousing about trifles, simply splendid when they discoursed about the war. Some of them, unlike the Belgians, were impatient to return to the front. They talked pleasantly of the enemy whom they spoke of generically as "Fritz." The kindest-hearted of the first lot, a little Cockney, bubbling over with fun and high spirits, ever ready to help the "Sisters" in any job that came to the one hand that had not been left in France, gloried in the distinction of having been in a bayonet charge. The Squire, much interested, asked for details, gleefully forthcoming.

"Yer see red, sir. I got after a fat 'Un. Lord lumme! 'E run a fair treat, 'e did. But I stuck him to rights. I lost my 'ead though. Couldn't see nothink nor nobody except 'im. In my silly 'aste I missed some fine opportoonities."

"Opportunities?"

"Wounded 'Uns, sir, lyin' there to me 'and. I might 'ave 'ad 'arf-a-dozen notches on my old rifle, instead of one!"

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Sir Geoffrey.

"Yer see, sir, we knows what they done to women and children."

By this time, George Mucklow and the first to join were at the front, and every Sunday, during Morning Service, Mr. Hamlin would stand up, before the Litany, and read out the names on the Roll of Honour. The congregation, after Service, remained quietly in the church till the National Anthem had been sung.

Mrs. Yellam sat alone in her pew, rigidly upright.

At home, alone in the evening, she talked to her dog. Solomon would sit in front of her, staring up into her massive face, with one ear half-cocked, very alert, very sympathetic.

"You be a wondersome dog."

Solomon's tail flickered.

"You knows more'n they donkeys as walks on two legs."

Solomon winked.

"You knows what a hard old flint I be, same as I digs up in garden."

Solomon laid a protesting paw upon her knee.

"You knows that I be tried beyond my powers, that I be mazed and dazed beyond what tongue can tell."

Solomon leaped into her lap, and attempted to lick her face.

"No, no, Solly; my kissing days be over."

Solomon refused to believe this.

"You knows, too, that my Alferd be going to the wars, and he won't come back. 'Twill kill that pore white-faced lil' maid. But 'twon't kill me, I be too tough, Sol. I be getting tougher. And I get no taste out o' life neither. I be so wicked that, times, I could lift my hand to kill they who stay behind, guzzling ale, grinning because they think theirselves so clever! I fair wonders that you can love so wicked an old 'ooman as I be."

Solomon, as a last reassuring protest, would curl up and fall asleep. Mrs. Yellam would sit on, staring into the fire, trying to adjust the workings of the Divine Mind with her own perplexed intelligence. Often kindly sleep would come to the rescue, and she would wake with a start to find the fire burnt out and the kitchen cold. But Solomon lay snug and warm against her.

Many persons, besides Mrs. Yellam, were mazed and dazed during these Spring days. At Neuve Chapelle, our cavalry had their feet in stirrup ready to ride down the enemy, when a thick mist rolled up and balked them of their prey. Jupiter Pluvius seemed to be fighting against us. The appalling earthquake in Italy was joyously affirmed by Germans to be God's judgment upon an ally who had deserted them. Strikes in the industrial parts, Irish troubles going from bad to worse, seemed to indicate the chastening hand of Omnipotence.

But we had accomplished a mighty miracle.

Five hundred thousand men were in France, and not

a life lost during the perilous operations connected with transport.

And then came the crushing disaster of the *Lusitania*. A wave of horror and rage swept over the country. Till now, Lissauer's "Hymn of Hate" had aroused ridicule, not resentment, amongst English-speaking peoples. The Belgian atrocities, known in all their horror to very few, had been accepted as the handiwork of brutes driven mad by drink and blood-lust, not as the systematic, inspired doctrine of Frightfulness. But when all Germany rose up to justify the slaughter of helpless women and children, when streets were beflagged, medals struck, and the schools held holiday, the nation began, at last, to grasp the truth. Might meant to stick at nothing.

Recruiting, in the rural districts, received a sharp stimulus.

Fancy, lying awake at night, shed many tears, but none before Mrs. Yellam. The pair, so strangely different, got on well together, because, so Susan said, the girl was not a chatter-box. Often they would meet and part without exchanging more than a dozen words. Fancy would help with the work, the never-ending cleaning and sweeping, or take some sewing and sit by the kitchen fire in silence. These quiet ways endeared her more and more to Alfred's mother, and occasionally, very seldom, Fancy would be vouchsafed a glimpse of an indurated heart. She had noticed that Mrs. Yellam avoided any direct reference to the Deity, Whose name, before the war, had been so often on her lips, the personal God, Whose guiding finger, even in trivial, domestic affairs, could be so plainly seen. One day, on the eve of Alfred's departure for France, Fancy said nervously:

"God will be with Alfred."

Mrs. Yellam said quickly:

"He be wi' the Kayser, too, seemin'ly."

Instantly she closed her lips, as if fearful that more might leak from them. Fancy remained discreetly silent. She comforted herself with this reflection: faith in works sustained this unhappy old woman. She laboured abundantly for others at Pomfret Court, and tended her garden diligently so that she might have fruit and flowers and vegetables to bestow upon poorer neighbours. In church, her responses were clear and regular, her deportment irreproachable, but she never discussed the sermon, once a favourite mental exercise, and Fancy came to the conclusion that she no longer listened to it, too much obsessed by her own perplexities.

About this time Nether-Applewhite was electrified out of its apathy by an extraordinary event, something so unexpected that Hamlin himself, who had foreshadowed such a remote possibility in his sermon on Patriotism, began to wonder if he had been inspired.

George Mucklow won the Victoria Cross!

This heavy, stolid young man, who shut both eyes when his shins were imperilled by a cricket-ball, who was "afeard wi' maids," who had been driven to the colours before the toe of a thick boot, performed one of those deeds that thrill an Empire. Fortunately for him, the tremendous opportunity of which Hamlin had spoken came at a moment when Authority was looking on, and able to record what took place. George confessed afterwards that at the time he didn't know what he did, or how he did it. Out of some subconscious zone surged the irresistible impulse blindly obeyed. A shell fell in the trenches at a moment when the officer on duty was making his rounds. Not an "Archie" or

a "Black Maria" but something smaller than a football. Dozens of men were close to it. George darted past the officer and hurled himself upon it.

It didn't explode!

Within a week, George's photograph was given pride of place in half-a-dozen newspapers. And then the supreme decoration was conferred. He returned home on leave; the King pinned to his tunic the bronze cross; Jane Mucklow and Uncle witnessed the ceremony; George came back to Nether-Applewhite with his parents, and was the hero of another function when Sir Geoffrey Pomfret presented him with a gold watch and chain, a tribute from the Squire of the parish, and a well-lined purse, the gift of the parishioners.

The effect on Uncle may be imagined. For ever after he associated himself with George as owning an undivided half interest in the cross, and in describing the glorious deed he assumed the royal plural, and with it some of the attributes of a monarch.

"Us was standing at attention," he would say, "as I be standing now, when the dam thing falls slam-bang in front of we. Neighbours, 'twas a moment as won't bear thinking on. Many souls all unfit for Kingdom Come. What does we do? We falls atop o' that there cannon-ball—'twas big enough to blow a thousand fellers to glory—and hugs it to our buzzums. 'Tain't a thing to brag about, but us was in the noospapers, and —and, well, you knows the end on't—Buckingham Pallis! And, believe me or not, neighbours, but this be sober truth. Me and King Garge was hobnobbing together for the space of one mortial minute, just so friendly and kind as true brothers. I nodded to 'un, as I nods to you, and, by Jo! he nods back to me."

Jane Mucklow had believed that George would perish in his first action. He had come triumphantly through half-a-dozen. And, to-day, he wore the proudest decoration that England's King can bestow. At a bound, she became an impassioned optimist. She discerned clearly the hand of Providence. King George was beheld as the Lord's Anointed. Queen Mary towered higher than he as the sacrosanct Mother. Mrs. Mucklow had her tale to tell, and told it with Uncle's unction and satisfaction.

"Queen Mary looked at my Garge as if 'twas her own dear son. Yes, she did. And then she smiles sweetly at me. I tell 'ee this—Queeny Mary was just so proud o' my Garge as I be. A good, kind 'ooman! I allows that, now and again, I ha' raised my blasphemious voice against they crowned heads, believing in my every-day way that they wore golden crowns when we pore folks was a-wearing made-over bonnets. Such wicked thoughts be clean gone from me. I be fair aching to sing 'God save the Queen' next Sunday morning."

A neighbour remarked timidly:

"Lard bless 'ee, Jane Mucklow, we sings 'God save the King.'"

Jane answered solemnly:

"You sings what you please. I began my life singing 'God save the Queen.' And I means to sing it again next Sunday."

But the glory that encompassed her nephew's thick head as with a halo flickered like a farthing dip in the mind of Susan Yellam. Her poor heart was lacerated by envy and jealousy. If George were indeed chosen by Providence to wear the Victoria Cross, what decoration would He award to her Alfred? The press had

laid emphasis upon George being amongst the first to volunteer. If Queeny Mary knew the whole truth, would she have smiled sweetly at George's mother? Not she!

She laid the matter before Solomon that same night, after the memorable function which took place at the Shrine.

"Solly, my soul be in sore trouble."

Solomon considered this attentively.

"Yes, my dog, I be setting in the seat o' the scornful. I be weary o' my groanings. I ha' conceived sorrow and brought forth ungodliness."

Solomon whined.

"Why be this change come upon me, Solly? 'Tis written: Upon the ungodly He shall rain fire and brimstone, storm and tempest. But, to-day, seemingly, that be the lot o' the godly and the fatherless. To the ungodly be given Victoria Crosses."

Solomon sat up and begged his mistress to be silent.

She concluded sorrowfully:

"I be cast down, and they that trouble me will rejoice at it."

Solomon leapt into her lap, and thrust his nice cold nose against her cheek.

Hamlin visited her from time to time, but as friend, not priest. Wisely, he bided his time to speak, wondering when the right moment would come. She received him respectfully, answered his questions, enquired after Mr. Edward, who had just received his Sam Brown belt, and then relapsed into exasperating silence.

Meanwhile, Mr. William Saint had not neglected his opportunities. The man chosen by Hamlin and Alfred to "carry on" during Alfred's absence was sober and honest, but a poor talker. Saint bought a motor-'bus in May,

which he used at first to take passengers to and from the railway station, some four miles distant. At the same time, he made arrangements to entertain summer guests, renting a small house with a garden overlooking the Avon, which served as an annexe for middle-class trippers, elderly spinsters who drew in water-colours, officers' wives with children, and professional men seeking a little cheap fishing. Saint drove the 'bus himself, engaging a good-looking young woman to take his place in the bar. Now and again he made expeditions to Salisbury, filling his 'bus with strangers who wished to see the Cathedral. Before June was out, he started a bi-weekly trip. In July he began carrying parcels.

Hamlin, accordingly, said a word to the Squire. But what could be done? The Squire and he stuck faithfully to the regular carrier. Others consulted their own convenience. Mrs. Yellam told Fancy that Alfred's business was steadily diminishing in volume.

"Have you told Alfred?" asked Fancy.

"No. And don't 'ee tell him, neither."

"Not me. Anyways, so long as dear Alfred be safe and well, I shan't worry about money matters."

Mrs. Yellam said tartly:

"Folks wi' no money to lose can allers sleep sound at nights." Then, realising that she had slapped an innocent cheek, she added in a pleasanter voice: "If Alferd keep safe and well, he'll downscramble this raskil so soon as he be homealong."

Fancy kissed her.

"He will be homealong soon," she whispered.

"How do 'ee know? You ain't got a letter saying so?"

"N-n-no."

Mrs. Yellam's voice became testy again.

"Then how do 'ee know?"

Fancy hesitated, blushing. But Mrs. Yellam pressed her point. Finally, the girl made confession. When Alfred went to France, she had consulted the cards.

Mrs. Yellam exploded. What ridiculous notions young maids got, to be sure! Cards, indeed! Very scornfully, she informed Fancy of the existence of a so-called wise woman, half-gypsy, who lived in a tumble-down cottage at Ocknell.

"You go and see that old grammer. 'Twill cost 'ee sixpence. For a shillin' she'll tell 'ee a fine fortin, marry 'ee to a young lord, and make 'ee the mother o' nine children. I ha' no patience wi' such tricks."

Fancy said humbly:

"Alfred thinks it foolishness, just as you do, but . . ."

"Well?"

"The lady in Salisbury, as taught me, did say that I should marry a soldier. Alfred laughed at that, till—till he became one."

"You bain't married to a soldier yet."

"No. That's true."

Fancy sighed. Mrs. Yellam went on with some knitting. Suddenly, she said sharply:

"What did they cards say?"

Fancy smiled faintly.

"They said that Alfred would come back—soon."

Mrs. Yellam knitted on. After a long pause, she pronounced a verdict.

"I bain't one to talk about what I don't understand. If so be as Alfred comes back soon, and if he marries 'ee, I may own up that cards do tell truth sometimes."

CHAPTER XII

THE EMPTY PEW

AFTER her Alfred went to the front, Mrs. Yellam's interest in the Tommies who had been "over the top" became more acute. She listened to everything said, regardless of a timely caution from Lionel Pomfret, who, before he rejoined his battalion, warned her that Mr. Atkins, with all his glorious qualities, was not too scrupulous a respecter of the truth. When the wounded men fell to talking amongst themselves, or before sympathetic females, the hypercritical might have noted a valiant determination on the part of each speaker to go "one better" than his predecessor. And the essential fact that these boys, most of them under twenty-five years of age, laughed at and chaffed each other when relating horrors merely piled Pelion upon Ossa in the mind of Mrs. Yellam. It seemed to her—and to how many more mothers?—that none could escape death or mutilation. One man was dumb from shell-shock. A "Black Maria" had buried him and ten others. He alone survived, unable to tell in speech what he had undergone. Mrs. Yellam paid this man particular attention, because her imagination was lively enough to realise what loss of speech would mean to herself. She told Jane Mucklow, with portentous shakings of the head, that the poor lad had lost his tongue for evermore. What else could be expected? Jane, now in happier mood, remarked senten-

ously that miracles still happened. Mrs. Yellam smiled grimly, wondering whether Jane was thinking of what George had done and accounted that achievement a miracle. And Jane could afford to take a rosy view of life, inasmuch as Adam was still in England, and George, with a view to stimulating recruiting, had been given a snug billet at the dépôt of his regiment. All the credit due to George had, by this time, been assumed by Uncle. He not only took part, as has been said, in the heart-thrilling exploit, but assured everybody that the valour of his son had been begotten in him by a sire known far and wide to be without fear, the Bayard of the countryside! Jane accepted this hypothesis with creditable derision. She would say in reply to strangers avid for details: "Do 'ee talk to Garge's father. *He was there!* Garge be his father's son from stem to starn. My boy'd ha' behaved hisself very different. He'd ha' crawled down a rabbit-hole, he would, so be as one were handy."

Some strangers, pleased with this whimsical exposition, pressed money into Jane's hand, which she accepted with a humble and grateful heart, adding even more slily: "Thank 'ee very kindly. Money be scarce wi' us, since my dear husband's son won the Victoria Cross, because the father o' such a notable hero has to drink his brave boy's health so many times a day."

One memorable night, when most of the Tommies were asleep in the Saloon, the dumb man burst into excited speech, and talked for about two hours, to the delight of seventeen comrades. When Mrs. Yellam heard the wonderful news next morning, she was immensely comforted. That afternoon Fancy noticed a change in her, and was emboldened to strike iron when it happened to be hot.

"Miracles do happen," she affirmed, with an odd expression upon her pale little face.

Mrs. Yellam passed no remark on this. In her opinion, formulated long before the war, miracles had been wrought long ago in the misty, prehistoric times of the apostles, and not since. Fancy continued nervously:

"A miracle happened to me."

"What do you say, child? A miracle happened to—*you?*"

Fancy nodded. As a little girl, during her school-days, she had told her tale many times with the abominable conviction that it failed to convince, although it might excite astonishment and sympathy. When she grew older and more reserved she ceased to tell it, wincing from incredulity. She hated to tell it to this austere old woman, whose tongue could be so sharp, but impulse conquered apprehension.

"I was four years old at the time. And I was playing in the street just opposite to our house with some other children. A great dog came rushing down on us, snapping right and left. Folks said afterwards he was mad, but I don't know. Someway he was killed, so Father told me, before that was made certain; killed and buried."

"A mad dog! My!"

"The other children ran away. I—I didn't."

"Why ever not?"

"I couldn't. I stood still, all of a dreadful tremble. And he came bang at me."

"What a fearsome tale! You pore lil' maid!"

Up to this point of the narrative, Fancy had generally received just such sympathy, particularly when telling the story to mothers. She paused; her cheeks

flushed; but her large eyes rested tranquilly upon the eyes of Susan Yellam.

"Well, dear, go on!"

"When the dog was quite close, I saw Mother."

Mrs. Yellam gasped.

"You saw your mother, who was dead!"

"I never think of Mother as dead. Yes, I saw Mother standing between me and the dog. She never looked at me; she looked at the dog. And the dog saw her."

"I never heard such a tale in all my life."

"The dog saw her. He stopped of a sudden, turned, and went back—howling. And I howled, too. Mother turned as the dog turned, and give me one beautiful look. Then she went."

Mrs. Yellam grasped the arms of her chair, still staring into Fancy's artless face. But no outburst of incredulity escaped from her as Fancy had feared it would. Her logical mind grappled with the facts as presented. She said, after a long pause:

"You thought you saw her."

"No. I did see her—plain as plain."

"But, Fancy dear, seeing as she died afore you was born, how did 'ee know 'twas she?"

"I'd seen Mother ever so often before."

"When and how?"

After some hesitation, Fancy narrated, with many details, her psychic experiences not only with her mother but with the four Evangelists. The girl's mordant anxiety that the astounding tale should be believed bit deep into the elder woman's heart. To Fancy's delight no incredulity was expressed. And Mrs. Yellam's face remained calm and kind. Solomon listened, also, with singular alertness and an eager intelligence which, to

Fancy, indicated full belief. Indeed, Solomon seemed to be saying to himself: "Yes, yes, we know about that. We see things every day that would astonish all of you, if we were allowed to talk about them." And, in the middle of the story, the dog, that never showed any affection for others in the presence of his mistress, leapt suddenly into Fancy's lap and remained there. Long afterwards, Mrs. Yellam admitted that this mark of confidence upon Sol's part had impressed her. Inwardly she explained things quite to her satisfaction. She beheld Fancy as a four-year-old, a tiny mite, all eyes, physically weak, the victim of a perfervid imagination. Her own little girl, Lizzie, physically robust, would invent somewhat similar stories about tramps and sweeps quite as apocryphal as these tales of communings with Matthew and Mark. She remembered smacking Lizzie, and telling her that she was a little liar. No doubt, Fancy's father, rather a weakling, has encouraged the mite. Since Alfred's engagement, Mrs. Yellam had met Mr. Broomfield, and summed him up trenchantly as half a man.

However, she kept such thoughts to herself, saying quietly:

"You be a strange girl, Fancy, but you speaks what you believes to be sober truth, and I love 'ee."

Fancy had to be satisfied with this.

The first year of the war came to an end.

So far, Nether-Applewhite had been fortunate. None of the young men had been killed; none had been seriously wounded. And it was generally held that "Fritz" couldn't stick another winter. Alfred became a sergeant. Mrs. Yellam appeared in her pew, next Sunday, wearing a new bonnet. But, coming out of church, she met William Saint, and cut him dead. She now thought

of him, habitually, as a "Prooshian," out for world-dominion. When her Alfred returned from the wars, he would smash William Saint. The triumph of such a "sneak" must be short-lived. Like the Kayser, he had sold himself, body and soul, to Satan. Satan would claim his own in God A'mighty's good time. Renewed belief in a Personal Deity had crept back into a heart less indurated. But He remained there, so to speak, on sufferance. At any moment, He might be driven out, as before. Omnipotence, so Mrs. Yellam argued during many vigils, could not be reasonably regarded as such if Satan triumphed unduly. It is to be feared that a daily motor-'bus service to Salisbury and back under the auspices of William Saint would have been regarded as a Satanic triumph. But such a service, as yet, had not been inaugurated.

Alfred wrote home once a week, alternately to Fancy and his mother. The life agreed with him. Obviously he accepted rough and smooth philosophically, regarding himself as a part of a vast machine that would "rampage" on with or without him. Although he was careful to keep from his mother and Fancy the horrors which they heard from the wounded soldiers, now and again some careless phrase would reveal, illuminatingly, everything that the good fellow wished to suppress.

"You enjoy your food as never was," he wrote, "when you know that any square meal may be the last. A chum of mine got it yesterday. And he was smoking a Woodbine I gave him. The man next him, as told me all about it, finished the Woodbine. I couldn't help laughing."

"Sometimes," said Mrs. Yellam, deliberately, "I thinks they be all mad." She turned almost fiercely upon

Fancy. "Why did he laugh, my boy as hated to kill a fly?"

Fancy hazarded a conjecture.

"Men are not so very, very different from us women. I often laugh to save myself crying."

Mrs. Yellam admitted that there might be something in this.

The Squire was busy with his bailiff, fattening bullocks, and, generally speaking, trying to increase his flocks and herds. In this task, he found an enthusiastic partner in Fishpingle, who possessed two obsessing interests: love of the land and love of the Pomfrets. Nobody, except the Squire and Lady Pomfret knew that this quiet, handsome old man, so distinguished in appearance, and so choice in his use of words, might have been lord of the manor, had he marched into life along the broad highway which leads from the altar. Fate ordained otherwise. Fishpingle had been constrained to stroll placidly along a by-path. He hoped that he would so walk till the end.

His point of view was characteristic. Of the more complex designs of Providence, which such men as Hamlin were seeking to elucidate, Fishpingle took no cognisance. He admitted gravely that they lay beyond his vision. But he was quite certain that the land, the backbone of England, must and would receive the attention which, before the war, had been so unwisely withheld. He had always wanted to see his country independent of necessary supplies—wheat, cattle, sheep and hogs—imported from other countries. Upon that peg he had hung his philosophy. And now, towards the close of his days, he believed that what he had prayed for might come to pass. To that end he was prepared to

consecrate such energies as were left to him. Incidentally, his enthusiasm served to wean Sir Geoffrey's mind from acrimonious criticism of politicians. To provide in the present means that might fill the inexorable demand of the future absorbed the thoughts of Squire and Bailiff.

Towards the middle of September, two Nether-Applewhite men were killed in action. A week later, Lionel Pomfret was reported "severely wounded." Sir Geoffrey crossed over to France. Lady Pomfret remained at the Court in command of the hospital. She moved amongst the men with the same gracious smile upon her lips; courage and faith—those great twin brethren—sustained her; but the news was very bad, so serious that Mrs. Yellam hardened once more her heart. Lionel had been shot through the back, and lay, half-paralysed and in constant pain, in a receiving hospital. Upon the Sunday after these details reached Nether-Applewhite, Susan Yellam sat huddled up in her pew, and almost mumbled the responses. Alone with Fancy, her sorrow broke into words:

"I be thinking o' keeping away from church next Sunday."

"Mother—!"

The dear word escaped from Fancy's lips unconsciously. She had never used it before, except in her thoughts.

"What be you callin' me?"

Fancy knelt beside her, stroking her rough hand.

"I called you 'Mother.' Do you mind?"

"No, no; but I bain't worthy to be your mother. If Master Lionel be taken, Alferd'll go, too. I can't bring myself to look at my lady. I can't look Pa'son square

i' the face, neither. I reads the Bible, Fancy, and the holy words do seem to mock me. I ain't been near those two pore souls as ha' lost their boys. For why? I ain't got no comfort for 'em."

Fancy said desperately:

"If you keep away from church, others will pass remarks."

"As if I keered about that!"

"Wouldn't you care if I stayed away, just because you did?"

Mrs. Yellam considered this. Her face relaxed.

"Maybe. Anyways, I'll go next Sunday. But, child, it be sinful to sit in God's House wi' such a soul as mine."

Fancy said in a low voice:

"Your *soul* is right. You mind what Mr. Hamlin said about that? George Mucklow won his Cross because our souls are always right."

Mrs. Yellam shook her head. Then an idea came to her. A faint smile flickered about her lips.

"Souls may take a notion to leave us for a spell. My soul seems to have flown out o' winder, as it did when Lizzie died."

"But it came back."

"Yes; that be true; it came back. Forgi' me, child, for shovin' my wickedness on your lil' shoulders."

"Dear Mother, you must talk to somebody."

"When I be alone, evenings, I talks to Solly."

"Well, I never!"

"And he understands me, yas, he do. He be very human, and a gert sinner."

Fancy laughed; and the pretty trickle of sound may

have melted a little ice. Susan Yellam laughed with her.

"Solly—a sinner?"

"Ay. He be a black murderer. He killed a cat day afore yesterday, and come back to me, all over scratches, and wi' a look as if—as if he'd been churched."

"What a naughty hypocrite! I wish he hadn't killed the poor cat."

" 'Twas a vagabond cat, no better than she should be. I scolded Solly, and told 'un to kill William Saint's tabby, if so be as he couldn't help breaking the Sixth Commandment. I be no better than Solly."

Fancy looked round.

"Where is the naughty dog?"

"Ah-h-h! He be courtin' some four-legged hussy. I knows 'un. Last night he come in after bed-time, so pleased as Punch. There be Original Sin in animals, as ther be in us. And feeling as I does, 'tis easy to forgive Solly his trespasses. Now you knows nearly everything."

As the days succeeded each other, slightly better news came from France about Lionel Pomfret. At the end of the month the Squire brought him home. He lay upon his back; pain had become intermittent instead of constant. A great specialist said that he might, in time, recover the use of his lower limbs. Not a complaint leaked from his lips. Susan Yellam accepted this partial recovery from what had been deemed a lethal wound as a sign vouchsafed to her. Jealousy, however, was kindled by the professional nurse, who kept from her patient an old friend lavish with bull's-eyes in happier days and doubly anxious on that account to minister faithfully to him in the unhappy present.

London was visited by Zeppelins. Nether-Applewhite would have accepted this fresh proof of Hun "frightfulness" with more Christian resignation, if one of the villagers had not happened to be present during the October raid which caused such destruction in the Strand. Uncle heard the tale at first hand, and repeated it everywhere. Martin Mowland, the bricklayer, had travelled to London to see his son, who was lying, desperately wounded, in the Charing Cross Hospital. According to Martin the Zeppelin had hovered just above his head, about tree-high. Then bombs had fallen with terrifying explosions. Uncle supplied supplementary detail to his own audience at the *Sir John Barleycorn.*

"I says to Martin: 'What did 'ee do, old friend?' And he says to me: 'Uncle,' he says, 'I thought my hour was come, but I legs it away so fast as I can to my lodgings. . . .'"

At this point Uncle, being an accomplished *raconteur,* would pause. Then he would add impressively:

"Neighbours, I don't blame 'un, although speaking for myself, I knows that I should ha' stood still, onless, maybe, I'd seen some nice lil' alehouse handy. Well, Martin, he legs it homealong so fast as if a hornet's nest were tied to his starn-sheets, and presently he pulls up like to catch his breath. And then he takes a squint upwards. Dang me, 'tis hard to believe some true stories. But Martin Mowland do take his oath to this. He'd run the most of a mile, giving tongue, too, I'll warrant. And when he looks up, as I be a Christian man, that there Zep had follered he, and was slam bang over his head."

"Lard preserve us! Whatever did 'un do?"

Uncle solemnly put the finishing touch to the narrative.

"What did Martin do? He stands stone-still, and puts up his old umbrella."

Many persons in the village believe to this day that Martin Mowland saved his life by putting up his ancient umbrella. Unquestionably Providence had stretched forth a Hand to preserve a worthy man who, as bricklayer, could ill be spared.

During November, it will be remembered, Conscription was admitted to be inevitable, and shirkers were adjured to join up before they were "fetched." Many did so. Near Salisbury was established a vast camp of Canadians, jolly fellows who swung, route-marching, through Nether-Applewhite, winking gaily at the girls, and setting an inspiring example to the young men still clinging to the soil.

Susan Yellam, spectacles upon nose, read all articles in her paper which dealt drastically with recalcitrants.

Would they take William Saint?

This question obsessed her. William was single and of military age. But his usefulness in the village could not be gainsaid, even by Captain Davenant. Of late, William had begun to cough, particularly in his sanded bar-parlour, or when he happened to be talking to Squire or Parson. His yellow gills confirmed the general opinion that he enjoyed poor health. Susan Yellam maintained that Willum was malingering, and deserved such obloquy as descended upon the empty head of Ezekiel Busketts, the brother of the sometime "odd man" at Pomfret Court. Ezekiel, presenting himself for examination before a medical board, had provided himself with an ancient truss, once the property of a deceased father. Unfortunately, he adjusted the truss so improperly that detection and ridicule fell upon him. Uncle, being dis-

tantly of kin to Ezekiel, covered his retreat with no harsher comment than this:

"'Twas a very sad mishap."

Susan, to return to William Saint, asked for a "sign," which, if unfavourable, might be taken to indicate how deeply she had incurred Divine displeasure. Some people, with greater advantages than Mrs. Yellam, believe devoutly in signs. Lionel Pomfret's slow recovery had been thankfully accepted by Susan as a sign that Satan was not having it all his own way in Nether-Applewhite. If William Saint was removed from the scene of his time-serving activities, Mrs. Yellam felt that a signal victory over the powers of Evil would have been achieved. Such a victory, in a true religious sense, would re-tighten the spiritual fibres that, before the war, had bound her so closely to Omnipotence. Nay, more; she dared to presume that if Willum went, her Alfred would return, and pick up the scattered parcels of his good business as of yore.

She confided all this to Solomon, but not to Fancy.

Uncle furthered her wishes without any "mumbudgetting" between brother and sister. He disliked Saint, because his ale was watered. But he liked to meet his cronies at the *Sir John Barleycorn*. Being a brave, candid fellow, with a half-interest in the V. C., he told Saint to his face what he thought of the ale.

"I likes my ale, and I bain't ashamed on't. I see eye to eye wi' this yere Horatio Bottomley about they pumpuritans, which I make bold to say includes milkmen" (Saint sold milk) "so well as publicans. Me and Bottomley do think just alike about knaves, hypocrites, and they as grinds the face o' the pore. Much o' what

I read in Johnny Bull might ha' been written by me. I comes back to my tankard o' ale."

"You allers do, Uncle."

"What I likes about my first tankard be this. If 'tis good ale, such as used to be set afore a man, I drinks it wi' a grateful heart, a-smackin' my lips over the tankard to foller. If 'tis wishwash, I nourishes most on-Christian feelin's, and loses my thirst."

William Saint would reply imperturbably:

"For a patriotic man, you surprise me, Uncle. The ale is not what it was because good barley is needed for better purposes."

"I knows nothing about that."

"A man with your great knowledge of everything ought to know."

Uncle marked the irony, and resented it. In argument, as he well knew, Saint was too much for him. He began to study the publican and his hollow cough. He noted his manœuvres: the tiny bit of land ploughed up, the buying of horses for remount agents, the sale of forage to the same interested parties, who might be trusted to speak up, when Conscription came, for an indispensable and indefatigable subject of the King. Uncle passed some not disagreeable moments speculating concerning the fouling of a well-lined nest.

As the season of Peace and Goodwill approached, Lionel Pomfret was just able to hobble the length of the terrace with the assistance of a pair of crutches. His campaigning days were over. It was doubtful whether he would be seen again in the hunting-field. But high spirits remained inalienably his. He plunged with renewed ardour into schemes for the more intensive culture of a thin soil, and displayed remarkable aptitudes forti-

fied by hard grinding at text-books. Hamlin spent many hours with him. In Lionel he seemed to see a type, the son of an ancient house, born with the silver spoon in his mouth, cradled in ease and luxury, popped on a pony to ride through life as soon as he was short-coated, sent to a great public-school, not to acquire learning, but manners and skill at games, pitchforked later into a famous regiment, with a handsome allowance, not to study the stern arts of war, but to hold his own at polo and pig-sticking.

Hamlin had deplored such upbringing. But the results confounded him, forcing him once again to thrust carefully-considered judgments into the melting-pot. The fact bristled in front of him that Lionel, and thousands like him, had "made good" against all odds, vindicating an education which consistently disdained efficiency except at games and sport. What a gulf yawned between Prussian and English officers! The Prussians had scrapped everything to attain efficiency. They had got it. And what an atrocious use had been made of it! But their efficiency had constrained young men like Lionel to an efficiency greater because the inspiration of a fine cause lay behind it. That must be the keystone of any arch—inspiration. Whether for good or evil, it fired men to supreme endeavour.

Out of Hamlin's four sons, three were now in the Army. Teddy, however, was the only one in France. The eldest son, in Orders, was still at Cambridge; the second, after passing through the O. T. C., had sailed for Salonika; the third had enlisted as a Bombardier.

Christmas, therefore, seemed likely to be happy, if not merry.

The Empty Pew

Upon Christmas Eve, Mrs. Yellam heard, officially, that Alfred was wounded.

Upon Christmas Day, at Morning Service, her pew was empty.

CHAPTER XIII

FANCY CONSULTS THE CARDS

ON the following Sunday, Mrs. Yellam's pew was empty again, conspicuously so, in the eyes of Hamlin. After luncheon he said to Fancy:

"Is Mrs. Yellam ill?"

"No, sir."

Hamlin guessed what had happened.

"No news is good news, Fancy."

"That's what the men say, sir. It ain't a mort of comfort to us women."

She looked very white, with dark, heavy lines beneath her eyes. Hamlin said a few encouraging words to which she listened attentively, nodding her head. Hamlin felt reassured. Fancy was unhappy, but she didn't despair. Before she left the study, she said slowly:

"I believe as Alfred will come back."

To the solicitude and sympathy of neighbours Mrs. Yellam exhibited a frigid indifference.

"I be just as well as never was," she remarked, when they enquired after her own health. "Time enough for such as me to fall sick if my Alferd don't come back."

No further news had reached her. To Jane Mucklow, now the village optimist, with George at home on leave for Christmas, Mrs. Yellam spoke with some bitterness. Jane meant well; her sympathy was sincere, but how could she, so high in Divine favour, understand? Noth-

ing could shake Susan's conviction that Alfred lay somewhere in France, mortally wounded, whilst William Saint, the hypocrite and rascal, knelt among the Communicants. To kneel with him, feeling as she did, would be, in her opinion, an act of sacrilege. She reflected miserably that, since confirmation, she had never missed a Christmas Celebration of the Eucharist.

On the Monday, Hamlin came to visit her as parish priest. He had carefully considered what he should say. The faith that burned within this strong man had been a plant of slow growth, watered by suffering, pruned by constant self-analysis, and yet, in its essence, the faith of a child, a faith independent of dogma, soaring high above technicalities, resting securely upon a belief in ultimate good. He could not disguise from himself that the Churches—all of them—had crippled expectation. There had been no renascence, no uplifting movement, no real enthusiasm. Political considerations and expediencies kept the Vatican silent when a voice, thundering as from Sinai, might have awakened millions to a realisation of the issues at stake. The Church of England and the Nonconformists remained almost as stagnant, content, for the most part, with the well-oiled grooves, waiting for and watching Temporal Power, unable or unwilling to take the lead, to speak definitely, to act decisively. With rare exceptions, the gospel of Love had not been authoritatively used to vanquish the gospel of Hate. Hamlin, need it be said? was no sentimentalist. He believed with Woodrow Wilson that Prussian militarism must be wiped out. He did not believe with Wilson that the German nation, as a whole, could be exonerated from blame. Available evidence justified a different conclusion. Lust for world-dominion, regardless of consequence, animated

and fortified the Central Powers because popular opinion lay behind them, unanimous save for a negligible minority. Non-resistance to a catastrophic policy of aggression, so potent, so meticulously organised threatened not only Christianity but civilisation. To turn the cheek to these smiting Huns was an unthinkable proposition to Hamlin. Nor could he find in the New Testament any injunction of the Master which could be twisted into a golden rule to be applied to States and nationalities. Christ dealt with individuals, preaching and practising the power of love as between man and man, not as between man and mankind. No text that Hamlin could find would justify forbearance towards a nation determined to inflict "Shrecklichkeit" upon the human race. On this point his mind was perfectly clear.

It was not yet, however, so clear upon issues still to be determined, such as "After the War" problems. He could not measure the stride about to be taken, provided militarism was crushed. He wondered constantly, with ever-increasing apprehension, whether love would triumph in the end, as he prayed that it might, creating a new world concerned with the happiness of the many, a world purged of the old insensate vanities and acrimonies.

Mrs. Yellam received him, as usual, a shade more formally, perhaps, with a slight tightening of her lips. Hamlin began as the personal friend of long standing, assuring the mother that her son, in all probability, was not severely wounded, that good news might be expected shortly, that very soon Alfred might be with her, out of the danger zone for a season, and able to give attention to his business. But he perceived that he was wasting words and time. She listened respectfully, saying nothing. He guessed what ebullitions of feeling were sup-

pressed. He had been tormented by her anxieties, by her doubts. The loss of his wife had been irreparable. And when his daughter left him alone in the Vicarage, with nothing to engross him but his work, an odd distaste of life had assailed him, a slackness which he fought tooth and nail. Till then he had hardly known fatigue, as it is known to all women, that dull apathy more mental than physical which questions means and ends, exaggerating the difficulties of the former and minimising the latter, an apathy continually whispering the sad words: *cui bono?* He knew how hard Mrs. Yellam had worked for her husband, her children, and in particular for Alfred. During the last ten years all ambition, all energies had been concentrated upon him alone. She had made, unconsciously, a God of him.

Hamlin rose up to deliver his message. Mrs. Yellam rose with him.

"I missed you in church yesterday, and on Christmas Day."

"One old 'ooman can't be missed, sir."

His eyes not his voice softened.

"You are mistaken, Mrs. Yellam. A woman of your character in this parish is missed—more than you think, perhaps."

"If Alferd comes back, you'll see me in my pew again."

"You have made that rash bargain with your God?"

She said defiantly:

"How do I know as He is my God? The Kayser claims Him."

Hamlin gazed keenly at her.

"If—if I left the matter there, Mrs. Yellam, in the firm hope and belief that God's way, inscrutable as they

may appear to us when all our energies are at a low ebb, will in His time be made manifest, may I not ask you, as your parish priest, to consider the example to others, the many, possibly, who are wavering in faith as you are?"

"Fancy Broomfield bid me think of that."

"Did she? Poor girl, she is distracted with anxiety, like you. But her faith sustains her. Have you thought of what Fancy told you?"

She answered him slowly, weighing her words:

"My faith be gone, sir. It may come back wi' Alferd. And feeling so bitter as I do about William Saint, who be stealing my boy's business, who be letting others fight for him, and making a fortin for hisself, can I kneel at God's Table?"

"No."

"What be I to do? Go to church, a whited sepulchre, and pretend that I be a Christian 'ooman? Do 'ee ask me to do that for sake of others?"

Hamlin remained silent. She continued, more calmly:

"I can't bring myself to go church along, although I'd be pleased to oblige you, sir."

"It is no question of obliging me, Mrs. Yellam. Aren't you adding to your heavy burden instead of sharing it with One Who laid it upon you and Who alone can lighten it?"

Grievously she shook her head. Hamlin took his leave. As he walked away, he muttered to himself: "Civil War—devastating Civil War raging in that poor old heart."

He returned to the Vicarage with his mind dwelling upon the eternal conflict, a conflict accentuated by the world-war, because its issues seemed to enrich or im-

poverish everybody. By it, without a doubt, Susan Yellam had been impoverished. He himself was conscious of enrichment. But—he had not lost a son. He had five children.

After tea Fancy cycled down, as usual, to the Yellam cottage. Solomon received her boisterously. She made sure that good news awaited her. A glance at Mrs. Yellam's set face put to flight her hopes. No news had come. Mrs. Yellam greeted the girl perfunctorily, and then said sharply:

"Have you brought 'em?"

"Yes," said Fancy.

She took from a small hand-bag a much-used pack of cards. Mrs. Yellam had cleared a space upon the kitchen-table.

"Set 'em out," she commanded.

Fancy sat down, and began to shuffle the pack. Hamlin would have smiled sorrowfully, had he seen Mrs. Yellam's intent face as the girl's slim fingers dealt out the cards. So it had come to this. Rejecting the faith of sixty years, this poor old woman asked for hope and happiness from a fortuitous arrangement of bits of painted pasteboard! Comedy upon the underlying tragedy. Hamlin knew, of course, that astrologers, mediums, crystal-gazers and the like were doing a roaring trade.

Mrs. Yellam, let it be noted, asked Fancy to bring the cards. Protest had quivered upon Fancy's lips and stayed there.

"Well?"

"It is well, Mother. Alfred will come back. This makes the third time; and, do you know, when I rode up Sol barked and wagged his tail."

"Did he? The dog be full o' fun now."

Fancy went down on her knees; Sol barked at her, and then began to race round the room, playing what Fancy called "mad dog." He ended by leaping, panting, into Mrs. Yellam's lap.

"I believe he knows something, Fancy."

"I'm sure he does. Would he carry on like that if—if Alfred was real bad?"

Thus each woman, in her artless way, consoled the other.

Upon the Tuesday, details reached Mrs. Yellam. Alfred had been shot in the arm; the bone was badly broken; his destination was Netley.

Strings were pulled by Sir Geoffrey. Before the week was out Alfred arrived at Pomfret Court. He looked much the same, not quite so rubicund; he carried his left arm in a sling. Upon the following Sunday, Mrs. Yellam appeared in her pew, and the fervour of her responses excited some comment.

She said to Fancy:

"The cards told true. Now, the sooner you and Alferd becomes man and wife the better."

The doctor, who visited Pomfret Court daily, raised no objections. Alfred's arm would keep him in Nether-Applewhite for many weeks, because small splinters, from time to time, would have to be extracted, a tedious process. Mrs. Yellam, when she heard this, said with twinkling eyes:

"Alfred, dear, why didn't you get wounded in both arms?"

To which Alfred replied slily:

"I kept my right arm, Mother, to slip round Fancy's waist."

He told many stories to which Fancy and Mrs. Yellam

listened entranced, and he spoke of the enemy with respect and without rancour. Upon one occasion, as his battalion moved into the trenches, a German had shouted out in excellent English:

"Be you the Wiltsheers?"

A reply in the affirmative provoked a request for "pozzy" (jam). But a tall sergeant, who stood up to hurl a can of preserve into the German trench, was shot dead. This aroused tremendous wrath, as quickly allayed when the same voice shouted again, asking if the sergeant who threw the jam had been hurt. He was soon satisfied on that point, and, immediately, a hubbub arose in the enemy trench, and a shot was heard. Soon afterwards the Wiltshires learnt from the lips of the first speaker that the man who treacherously slew the sergeant had been "done in."

"They ain't all bad," said Alfred.

To Mrs. Yellam's amazement, her son merely laughed when she told him of Willum Saint's activities.

"'Tis life, Mother. Down river, if a trout's caught behind an old stump, another takes his pitch before night."

Mrs. Yellam, however, noted with satisfaction that although Alfred was incapacitated from driving his motor-'bus, the business, since his arrival in Nether-Applewhite, had leaped ahead again with a renewed impetus. William Saint looked sour.

Fancy bought her modest trousseau, and, incidentally, put on several pounds in weight. The weather happened to be bitter, but she never felt cold when walking out with Alfred. He spoke with enthusiasm of his officers:

"They're fine gentlemen, Fancy. And those in the ranks are finest of all." Then he told her a story about two men in a London regiment, both privates and chums.

One was an East-ender; the father of the other owned a house in Park Lane. The Cockney asked his chum if he had ever visited Whitechapel. The other remembered that he had bought a bull-terrier from a fancier in the Mile End Road. He remembered, also, that he had been handsomely "done" over the deal. After a pause, the Cockney said with a grin: "I sold you that dawg, Algy. What a mug you was then!"

But Fancy remarked one amazing change in her lover. He never spoke of the future. His enjoyment of the present was unmistakable. This abstention from a topic which formerly had engrossed him became more and more significant. The girl realised what Alfred had been through, although, unlike most of the wounded men at the Court, he recited no "horrors." Gradually, too, she perceived a change in his face: he had "fined down"; his eyes were more alert, with a curiously steadfast expression. She had never talked with him about religion. That was taken for granted, and might be summed up as a cut-and-dried sense of certain obligations such as church-going, honourable dealings with neighbours, loyalty to the Sovereign, and sobriety of conduct. He knew nothing about the empty pew.

"Mother took my going awful hard. Did she talk to you about it?"

Fancy told him what had taken place. Alfred held his tongue till she had finished.

"Thought she'd lost her soul, did she? Poor dear!"

"William Saint doing so well and cutting into your business worried her dreadful. I think it worries her still that you takes it so easy."

Alfred meditated upon this. When he answered her, he conveyed to her mind an extraordinary sense of de-

tachment, as if he, the strong man, so enterprising as a carrier, so alert for "orders," had become suddenly an onlooker at the game of life. Perhaps surroundings lent themselves to this impression. They had climbed slowly to the high downs, and were standing near a noted landmark, a small tower known as the Pepper Box. A sharp frost had silvered the downs. The air was very still. Upon each side of them stretched the uplands, melting into distant woods. No animals were to be seen, not a sheep, not a bird. They seemed to stand alone in a beautiful, deserted world.

"I suppose," he said, "that 'tis like this. Before the war, I might have felt different towards William Saint. And after the war, Fancy, if I'm here, I shall try hard to get back my own again. But to-day I'm thinking of peace. Fed-up with war I am. I want to live quiet with you and Mother. I talked a lot of foolishness once about making big money. You didn't cotton much to the notion. Maybe you feared it would take me away from you?"

"I did."

"Well, maybe it would. Money drives some folks apart, and the want of it brings 'em together. And, out there, plotting and planning seems silly, because one may be—'next.' "

She clutched his arm. He smiled at her, continuing slowly:

" 'Tain't so terrible a thought. Most of us fears pain more'n death. I see more frightened folks in Nether-Applewhite than in the dug outs. Queer thoughts have come to me, my maid, since we two parted."

"Tell them to me, Alfie."

" 'Tisn't easy unless a man has the gift of words.

Times, especially at night, when an attack is expected, I've lain still as a dormouse, thinking that 'twas unreal, a dream like, and that soon I should wake up and find myself somewhere else."

"I often feel just that way."

"Ah-h-h! Another queer notion is this: the best seem to go first, Fancy; some of the young officers. Why? I figure it out that death is a big prize to such. It does explain things a bit, don't it? They get their reward—quick! And then I set to figuring who is best. God Almighty knows. One feller in my platoon, before I got my stripes, was a right-down scallywag, a gaol-bird."

"My!"

"'Twas his notion about death being a prize for the lucky ones. And he told me that he loved to think how bad he'd been, because he reckoned himself safe, sure to be one of the last to be called. Next week, he was blown to a pulp, except his face, and on that was the queerest smile I ever saw. I helped to carry in what was left."

She clung closer to him. He said in his ordinary genial tones:

"I feel myself again in Blighty, dear. But I want no unpleasantness with William Saint or any one else. I think, night and day, of you, soon to be my dear wife."

Love-making rolled on smoothly, as before the war.

But what Alfred had said remained in Fancy's mind. It explained much that had puzzled her ever since she was able to think: her father's ill-health and ill-fortune, her mother's premature death, and the big casualty-lists. If life was a dream—! If reality lay beyond—! Then

all the mysteries, the inequalities, the apparent injustices, could be explained. Such an explanation is old as human thought. It can be found in the Vedas, in the Bible, in the writings of the Gnostics, in some of the pagan and modern philosophies. Fancy, however, was neither concerned nor interested in speculations veiled in words she could not understand. Alfred's queer notions were his and hers, rushlights shining in the darkness. But terror touched her heart, when she applied the obvious conclusion to herself. If the best were taken, why then Alfred would be numbered amongst them.

As her wedding-day approached, this apprehension grew fainter and then disappeared for a time. She resolved to live in the present, not in the shadows of past or future. Such resolution has been a fairy godmother's gift to young women in Fancy's class of life. They turn their eyes gratefully to the sun whenever it shines upon them.

She had never been so happy before.

It was arranged that part of the honeymoon should be spent in London. After three days' sight-seeing, the pair would return to Mrs. Yellam's cottage. Alfred bestowed upon Fancy a black fur stole and muff, a wrist-watch, and a pair of silver-backed hair-brushes.

She placed these oblations upon a chair near her bed, so that her eyes could gloat upon them the last thing at night and the first thing in the morning.

Sergeant George Mucklow, V. C., promised to act as best man.

Mrs. Yellam was nearly as happy as Fancy. One fly settled in her ointment. Conscription had become the law of the land. But the local tribunal exempted William Saint. Uncle predicted that he would be called up

later. Jane, of course, contradicted this on general principles. With Mrs. Yellam she believed that Satan would take good care of his own.

The men at Pomfret Court gave a sing-song in Alfred's honour upon the afternoon before he left them. Fancy sat beside the bridegroom-elect amongst the quality. She liked one new song so much that she clapped her hands and called out "Encore" before anybody else. The chorus of that song is now known to every English-speaking soldier in the world.

> There's a long, long trail a-winding
> Into the land of my dreams;
> Where the nightingales are singing,
> And a white moon beams.
> There's a long, long night of waiting
> Until my dreams all come true;
> Till the day when I'll be going down
> That long, long trail with you.

Her dreams had come true; the night of waiting was past.

CHAPTER XIV

HYMENEAL

THEY were married from Mr. Broomfield's house in Salisbury, and, before returning to Nether-Applewhite, Mrs. Yellam reconsidered her opinion of Fancy's father. He was more than half a man. Call him three-quarters at least. The other quarter was woman. Fancy always affirmed that her sire had played mother to her. Mrs. Yellam, after some intimate conversation with Mr. Broomfield, believed this to be true. It seemed odd to think of a farrier—the brawny blacksmith of the village chestnut-tree—helping to undress dolls and smacking them when they misbehaved themselves. But Mr. Broomfield was not brawny. He had Fancy's pale face and large, luminous eyes. He talked about books, not story-books, which Susan Yellam disdained as "rubbishy truck," but solid, respectable treatises dealing with subjects far beyond Susan's ken, such as the better housing of the poor, communal kitchens, and a more equable wage for the working-man. About such talk hung a flavour of Radicalism, a whiff of Socialism. Mrs. Yellam gasped for breath when Mr. Broomfield "blasphemiously" labelled Christ as Socialist. As a set-off, the man actually believed in fairies! Mrs. Yellam had never met his like. But she admitted somewhat grudgingly his charm as a companion. He attended Divine Worship, regularly, observed the Sabbath, and spoke with enthusiasm of the

cathedral. He could laugh at his own mild jokes. Through him, Mrs. Yellam came to a subtler understanding of her daughter-in-law. She accepted Fancy, so she informed Mr. Broomfield, as a daughter, saying trenchantly: "No 'in-laws' for me." But she ceased to regard her as a child. Fancy's artless ways, she decided, were on the surface. Beneath might be found, by a diligent delver, a remarkable little woman, sensible, very affectionate, but queer, like her father. Mr. Broomfield, apparently, could enjoy a joke against himself. Susan, with a very limited sense of humour, was incapable of such a feat. Speaking of motors, Mr. Broomfield said whimsically:

"What I've lost over 'em, Mrs. Yellam, seems to have been picked up by Alfred. So—no complaints! Good money remains in the family."

To Susan this cheerful acceptance of bludgeonings indicated Christian resignation rather than humour. She told the farrier forthwith all about William Saint—the "Proosian." Mr. Broomfield listened sympathetically. He perceived that Mrs. Yellam was disappointed because Alfred had not "man-handled" a rascal and hypocrite, but he said with an odd chuckle:

"That makes things harder for this Saint, don't it?"

"I begs your pardon, Mr. Broomfield—whatever does you mean?"

She thought for the moment that he was as light in head as in body. Fancy's father went on chuckling:

"Well, from what you tell me of Alfred, and seeing what a big, strong man he is, I expect that William Saint is worrying. Like as not he looked for a row and wanted to get it over. Now, I reckon, being the coward you say he is, that he lies awake wondering when he'll catch it.

Once, when I was a boy, I had to wait for a good whipping from Saturday till Monday. I've forgotten the whipping, Mrs. Yellam, but I remember that miserable Sunday."

Mrs. Yellam was much impressed with this point of view, admitting cautiously that it opened new vistas. Disturbed nights must be William Saint's portion and punishment. Mr. Broomfield hammered home his nail:

"'Tis the same way with sinners—and this Saint seems a crafty sinner—outwardly they look fat and prosperous, but inwardly I reckon they give uneasy thought to a Day o' Judgment when they won't be invited to stand amongst the sheep. I've neighbours in this town, Mrs. Yellam, who have done the dirty on me. I never think of them. It dirties my mind to do so. I like to think of my friends instead."

"You be a true Christian man."

Later, she told Uncle, who set, perhaps, an undue value on chest-measurements, that Mr. Broomfield was very much of a gentleman, and repeated what had been said about Saint. Uncle saw the funny side of it, and smacked his thigh.

"Saint Willum—! I shall call 'un that in his own bar. 'Tis a rare jest. Saint Willum living amongst us sheep and knowing full well that he be a goat. He do act the goat, too, when the sheep be grazin' away from he. I could tell 'ee stories, Susan . . ."

"Don't, Habakkuk! Mr. Broomfield be right. I means to think o' my friends, and I refuses to dirty my mind wi' listenin' to stories o' goats."

Her responses in church became louder and more fervent. Having gained the shore, after many buffetings, she put from her disagreeable memories of billows past.

Fancy and Alfred returned from London town full of high spirits and overbrimming with talk. Fancy looked prettier than ever hanging upon the right arm of her sergeant. His left arm still hung in a sling. The doctor, who examined it periodically, said solemnly:

"I'm very sorry, Sergeant, but I can't pass you as fit for duty."

Alfred grinned:

"You do pull my pore arm about, sir, but don't pull my leg, please."

The doctor laughed.

"You may count on six weeks at home, perhaps more."

The momentary pain of having small splinters of bone extracted was negligible compared with six weeks of married bliss.

Fancy's happiness defies analysis. Her naïve ecstasies astounded Mrs. Yellam, to whom marriage had been rather a prosaic affair. She wondered occasionally if this had been her fault. Why had dull contentment set in so soon? As a young wife, she may have overbusied herself with domestic duties. Fancy practised wiles and guiles with Alfred. She planned quaint little surprises, played dexterously with an imagination which became as lively as her own. One evening, when Fancy was upstairs, Alfred took from his pocket some pieces of white paper, all that was left of three packets of food. Abroad on business, Alfred had lunched under a hedge by himself, far from home. Upon the paper were pencilings in Fancy's handwriting. Mrs. Yellam wiped her spectacles and put them on. She read three sentences:—"Meat sandwiches. Don't gobble 'em! Say grace and think of Fancy." Upon the next piece of paper this was scribbled:—"Bread and butter and cheese—and *kisses*." And

then the third:—"Rich cake stolen from Mother by a loving thief. P. S. Another fat kiss has just started to grow. F. Y."

Mrs. Yellam returned the papers. Alfred folded them carefully, and placed them in the inner pocket of his tunic.

"They go back with me to France," he said quietly.

Mrs. Yellam sighed.

"You be a lucky man, Alferd."

He nodded and went upstairs. Mrs. Yellam heard a tinkle of laughter. She sat on, thinking; a frown wrinkled her broad forehead. She had never played the game of love as Fancy played it. It occurred to her that she had missed something all her life without knowing what it was. It might be wise to consult Solomon, who was gazing at her interrogatively, with his head on one side. She did so.

"Be they a pair o' fools, Solly?"

Solomon never budged. This might be taken to mean an answer in the negative.

"There be wisdom in folly, my dog, and folly in wisdom. You knows that?"

Solomon wagged his tail. Mrs. Yellam continued:

"I be learning things, Solly, old as I be. I wish I'd ha' learned 'em earlier. I might ha' been a happier 'ooman. I might ha' made my man happier. Why do such knowledge come to us too late?"

Solomon gazed at his mistress intently. From his expression Mrs. Yellam divined that all her questions could be answered exhaustively by any dog able to wag his tongue instead of his tail.

The war went on.

Conscription began to dislocate small trades and indus-

tries, but Nether-Applewhite hardly felt the pinch of this. A few of the young women disappeared, seeking higher wages in munition-works. One or two returned to the village wearing coney-seal coats, and peacocking into church with bold eyes challenging attention from wounded heroes. Mrs. Yellam was much exasperated. All strikes she regarded as sinful. Satan, and his dark legions, had been the first to rebel against Authority. Hence—Hell! She envisaged as Hell industrial England, with its blast-furnaces vomiting flames and smoke day and night, with its black hordes of angry strikers disgracefully overpaid in comparison with the pittance doled out to Sergeant Yellam. Coney-seal coats "dirtied" her mind. Many of them, no doubt, were the obvious wages of sin. She rebuked Alfred severely, when he proposed to buy one for Fancy. Alfred defended himself and the wearers of the coats.

"It's one of the signs of the times, Mother. I thought you were an 'Onward' one."

"Lard help us! Not 'Onward and downward.'"

"It's all the result of the war," affirmed Alfred. "Money's scarcer amongst the quality, but poor folks are richer. Why shouldn't our girls have a good time? They're working hard for the country."

Mrs. Yellam retorted viciously:

"Being a man, wi' an eye for a pretty face, you sticks up for the girls. But what about they miners, a-smoking silling cigars and a-drinking champagne, when our boys are dying at one-and-tuppence a day? And some o' they strikers, so they tells me, 'd as lief live under Kayser Bill as under King Garge."

"Is that their fault, Mother?"

"What do you say? Gracious! Be you telling me that such wickedness be *my* fault?"

Alfred smiled pleasantly. He was not entitled to full credit for his answer; he had been talking upon the subject with Lionel Pomfret.

"It's the fault of the quality, Mother."

"What a tale!"

Alfred proceeded to explain. Although his brains worked slowly, and despite the lack of an adequate vocabulary, he could be trusted to repeat faithfully anything that had made a deep impression. He pointed out to Mrs. Yellam, in language she could understand, that the weak in mind and body were ever at the mercy of the strong. The quality, before the war, had been strong. They had exercised their strength, speaking generally, at the expense of the weak, fortifying their own impregnable position. The masses, with rare exceptions, had submitted to imposed conditions. They struggled on in the gloom, groping here and there for illumination. Ill-educated, ill-fed, ill-clothed, they became gradually conscious that things might be better and could hardly be worse. It made precious little difference to them, poor Bezonians, under which king they lived or died. The real advantages of living under King George were patent to others, not to these unhappy prisoners in bondage to their taskmasters. Alfred informed his mother, in conclusion, that within the memory of living man children of tenderest years had been driven to work in deep coal-mines, half-starved and half-naked, and kept at work, under the lash, in rabbit-holes of passages, because such work by warping their poor backs enabled them to get coal out of places where the straight-backed could not

go. Conditions had changed for the better since those days, but not much, not nearly enough.

Mrs. Yellam was visibly impressed.

Alfred went on in his own quiet way:

"I've talked with such fellers in the trenches, Mother. You be sure of this: they ain't going back to slavery."

"Slavery, Alfred, in England!"

"There are slaves in Ocknell, to-day, Mother. Some pore devils had to be 'fetched.' They didn't know enough to get out of their hog-wallows. 'Tis rank slavery for a man to bring up wife and six little 'uns on fifteen bob a week."

"Anyways," replied Mrs. Yellam, tartly, "I don't hold wi' fur coats on the backs o' hussies whose mothers can't afford decent underlinen. And that minds me o' the advertisements in my paper. I fair blush to look at 'un. Pictures o' garments that I hangs up to dry out o' sight in my back yard."

Alfred laughed loudly.

"It always seemed to me as if you women hid the things you were ashamed of. The pretty frillies flutter in the wind, where all can see 'em, and envy 'em. Nether-Applewhite knew when Rose Mucklow took to nighties trimmed with real Val."

Mrs. Yellam sighed, admitting frankly that she couldn't keep in step with the times. Alfred, conscious, possibly, that some of his mother's shafts were aimed at him, said tentatively:

"Are you miffed because I gave Fancy a fur muff and stole?"

"I don't know as I bain't. A wise man, my son, puts money in bank, not on back."

"I see you putting your savings into stockings. Blame

the war, Mother, not me. I aimed to make Fancy happy, and to see her smile, whilst I'm here to see it. We're both hay-making in these March winds."

Mrs. Yellam surrendered.

What Alfred said remained in her ample mind, to be considered carefully at leisure. She abhorred extravagance. But, in March, she might have bought a warm muff for herself, had she been told by her doctor that she would die before June. Insensibly she adopted part of Alfred's new philosophy. She set before bride and groom the best plain food procurable; she piled logs on the open hearth; she put the two coffin-stools into a cupboard.

And she read her Bible diligently, believing devoutly that she was basking in heavenly sunshine.

The six weeks raced by, but Alfred's arm mended less rapidly. He was given three weeks' more leave. His business had picked up wonderfully ever since he was able to bestow upon it personal attention. Perhaps William Saint withdrew tentacles, waiting for better opportunities later on. Alfred didn't drive his 'bus, but he whipped up old customers, chaffing them pleasantly, avoiding reproaches. All the women liked his manners, which were easy without being too free. Fancy felt jealous at times, and couldn't hide it: a tribute to love which Alfred accepted in the right spirit.

"I couldn't be unfaithful to you, if I tried," he whispered to her. "I love you so dearly that my heart warms to all females. I could kiss the ugliest just because you're my sweet wife."

"Oh, Alfie, I couldn't bear that."

He never left home without finding her on his return hovering about the wicket-gate, waving her hand as he appeared round the bend of the road, and hurrying to

meet him with outstretched arms. Those spoke eloquently of the suffering which approaching separation must impose. Each refrained from mention of France.

Alfred hoped that she would have something to console her, something intimately his and hers, when he went back to the front. From the first, husband and wife had discussed the possibility of children.

"Are you afraid?" he asked, thinking of her mother.

"Yes."

"Ah-h-h. I'm not surprised to hear that."

"I want to whisper something, Alfie."

He inclined his head. She kissed his ear, murmuring:

"I *am* afraid—afraid it mayn't come. That's the only fear I have."

He was profoundly moved, sensible that his feelings were the more tender because, before the war, he would have accepted paternity and all it implied as an ordinary happening. Till he had suffered himself—his wound had caused him intense pain—he had never thought of what women endure every time a child is born into the world.

"What a brave dear you are!"

She whispered again:

"Would you like a He or a She?"

Alfred insisted that first choice lay with her.

"I want a boy."

"I believe I should love a lil' maid best."

"Better than you love me, maybe?"

Having answered this in his own way, Alfred said abruptly:

"If 'tis a maid, you must call her Lizzie. 'Twill please Mother. I can see the child traipsin' after her."

Fancy said doubtfully:

"Lizzie ain't a pretty name, Alfie. I thought of Alfreda—Freda for short."

"Been thinking of that already, have you? Let it be Lizzie, Fancy. Promise me, dear!"

She promised, and then laughed gaily:

"Ain't we counting our chicks before they're hatched?"

"We might be worse employed."

"And if one comes, Alfie, I know 'twill be a big baby boy."

"You have it your own way. I allow it concerns you more'n me."

April was nearly over before Alfred went back. He might have been transferred to his dépôt, following the example of the hero. Sir Geoffrey was quite willing to pull more strings, and hinted as much to Sergeant Yellam. Alfred refused the kind offer, pledging the Squire to secrecy. Something he couldn't define, some dominating, irresistible impulse drew him to his own men. He admitted to the Squire that he was sorely tempted.

"I know my job, Sir Geoffrey. And I know how bad we are wanted."

Upon the eve of departure Fancy told him that she hoped, she believed, she was almost sure that the wish of both their hearts would be granted. If he got Yuletide leave, he might be in time for a christening.

Mother and wife travelled to Southampton to speed the Sergeant on his way. No tears were shed till his broad back was turned on them at the dock-gates. They were spared that heart-twisting spectacle, the slow warping from the wharf of a great transport, the strains of "The Girl he left behind Him," the long line of faces packed close above the bulwarks, the interminable wait till the ship became a blur upon the waters.

In silence they returned by train to Salisbury, sitting side by side, gripping each other's hands. A drizzle of rain obscured the landscape. Fancy told herself that sunshine would have been hard to bear. Capricious Nature seemed to be mourning with her, dropping soft tears upon a past four months so enchanting that they seemed, today, unreal, a mirage, too beautiful to be seen again. But Spring laughs through her showers. Before Nether-Applewhite was reached, the sun shone below the clouds, setting in a blaze of crimson splendour. Solomon greeted the women joyously; in the water meadows the Squire's black-and-white Frisian-Holsteins were grazing quietly; now and again Fancy heard the bleat of a calf. The plaintive cry seemed to turn her from a girl into a woman. She realised that never again could she be the girl of yesterday. Alfred would kiss a matron when he returned.

After supper, when things were washed up, and Mrs. Yellam had taken up her sewing, Fancy disappeared for a moment, returning with her pack of cards. Mrs. Yellam made no comment at first, but she fidgeted in her armchair. As Fancy shuffled the pack, she said quietly:

"Don't, dear!"

"I must, Mother. They told true before."

"Very well."

Resolutely she turned her eyes to her needle, not daring to look at Fancy's face. She found herself wondering whether Fancy would be tempted to cheat, to shuffle back some card of ill-omen. After an eternity of suspense, she heard Fancy's clear voice:

"It's quite all right. He's coming back."

Mrs. Yellam laid down her sewing, and rose majestically. In a small cupboard, a special sanctuary to the right

of the hearth, she kept some home-made cordials: mead, currant wine, and ginger-brandy. Upon very special occasions she would produce such strong waters, and drink one small glass, not more. Her feelings might be gauged by the cordial selected. Mead was well enough after village christenings and churchings; the currant wine was stronger tipple, and very heartening after a wedding. The ginger-brandy warmed bodies chilled by winter funerals.

She took down the currant wine, and fetched two glasses. Having filled them to the brim, she gave one to Fancy and held up the other.

"Alferd."

They clinked glasses and drank, very solemnly. Mrs. Yellam replaced the bottle of wine and washed the glasses. Returning to her chair, she perceived that Fancy was re-shuffling the cards.

"Leave well alone, child."

"I want to try something else."

"What, you queer creature?"

"I'm wondering whether IT will be a He or a She?"

"What notions you has, to be sure!"

Fancy laughed and dealt on. Mrs. Yellam sat down, looking into the smouldering embers, seeing, possibly, the shadowy forms of the children she had lost. The wooden cradle which had rocked them to sleep stood in its place to the left of the fireplace—full of logs. It would serve for Fancy's child, for her own grandchild. And upstairs, in an old chest of drawers, lay some little things, tiny shifts and frocks with lavender between them. Once, in a moment of dull despair, she had resolved to burn them. A kindlier thought had urged her to give them away. She had put that thought from her frowningly.

How deeply the gain of others magnifies and distorts our own loss! Happy instinct must have constrained her to keep these garments made by her own hands, although at the time she never recked that they might be worn, so long afterwards, by flesh of her flesh and bone of her bone.

"Mother . . ."

"Ah-h-h! You've settled the affair, have 'ee?"

"Yes. 'Tis a boy—another Alfred. Ain't you glad?"

"I be ready to welcome any babe, boy or girl, as belongs to Alferd—and you."

Solomon, dreaming blissfully of rats, woke up and wagged his tail.

CHAPTER XV

LEANNESS OF SOUL

LIFE meandered on in the village. Mrs. Yellam spent her mornings at Pomfret Court; Fancy took her place in the afternoon; they were together during the light-lengthening evenings. By this happy arrangement, two women, not of the same temperament, never saw too much of each other. They met at supper, glad to exchange the mild gossip of the day. And, always, after uneasy matutinal hours, Fancy felt a renewed zest in life, an appetite for work amongst the "boys," and a delightful consciousness that physical strength—heretofore lacking—was slowly coming to fortify a frail body against the still far-off ordeal. She learnt much from Mrs. Yellam, and said so with flattering reiteration. Mrs. Yellam may have learnt more from her, but she did not say so. That, perhaps, constituted the essential difference between them. Fancy's thoughts and ideas bubbled out of her mind, effervescent, like water from a chalybeate spring. Mrs. Yellam had suppressed her intimate thoughts since childhood. What she said, indeed, masked her real feelings, conveying to others an impression of shrewdness, cocksureness and unruffled calm. It would be grossly unfair to speak of this as a pose. Since girlhood, she had been shrewd, sure of herself, and calm. Now, when she was past sixty, these comfortable and admirable attributes deserted her. She judged herself quite as se-

verely as she judged her neighbours. She knew that, inwardly, she was questioning her wisdom, her cherished convictions, and her unruffled deportment.

"I be a whited sepulchre," she told Solomon.

Nevertheless, during these Spring days, when May was dancing in the woods and across the fields, rest and refreshment fell upon Mrs. Yellam's perplexed mind. By sheer force of will, for her own sake and for Fancy's sake, she called "Pax" to introspection, and, like a schoolboy, almost believed that the kindliest dew from heaven had fallen upon her. During this month, too, Alfred happened to be out of the danger zone, busy with new drafts who had not yet been under fire. And everybody in Nether-Applewhite predicted that the war must end soon because sheer exhaustion, military and economic, affected so tremendously the belligerents. Upon this *cheval de bataille* Sir Geoffrey Pomfret rode over all obstacles. Old Captain Davenant bestrode just such another charger. Uncle, you may be sure, ran with them, throwing his tongue, speaking to a breast-high scent.

"We be nigh the end on't," he told his cronies. "They Proosians be more fed up wi' mud and blood than us. I talks of what I knows. The slaughter o' they Huns be so fearsome that Kayser Bill be a-thinkin' night and day o' polligammy."

"Polly—who? I never heard tell o' she, Uncle."

To this interruption Uncle replied with something of his sister's majesty.

"Ah-h-h! This war'd be over now, if beastly ignerunce ran mute. Polligammy be practised, as I told old Captain, by cannibals and such. For why? Because they eats up the young men, and then there bain't husbands

enough to go round. Polligammy allows a man to marry so many wives as he's a mind to."

"Lard preserve our dear lives!"

"Yes, my sonnies, that's how life be preserved amongst savage tribes. They Huns be cannibals and worse. When I told Squire as they fellers used corps to make them tasty Bolony sausages, he couldn't believe me; but 'tis a fact."

"How do you know?" asked William Saint.

"Never you mind how I knows, Saint Willum. I don't never help myself to what isn't mine. I nourishes meself wi' sober truth, not lies. Where be I? Ah, yes. Well, neighbours, they be come to that pretty pass, pollygammy. I allows that one wife be enough for me."

"More than enough, 'tis said, Uncle."

"You be seldom right, my man, but times you hit the mark. Now, I figures it out this way. They Huns be savages, but not fools. One wife be more'n enough for any man, and if so be as Kayser Bill makes polligammy the law in German land, why, I says they won't stick it. 'Tis the beginning o' the end."

An old gaffer was not sure about this. Women in Germany, so he'd been told, worked with dogs in carts. A farmer with fifty wives might get a lot of work out of them. The gaffer spoke with some authority, having buried three wives in his time. All present knew that they had worked hard for their husband. Uncle, however, after more strong talk and weak ale, convinced his audience that peace would be declared before October. Wiser folk held the same opinion.

The villagers, at last, were beginning to feel the pinch of war. Wages had risen, greatly to their satisfaction, but prices outstripped them. The local store closed shut-

ters, because the proprietor was called up. The baker was baking bread somewhere in the North Sea. On Sundays Mrs. Yellam and other housewives ate cold victuals for dinner, unless they stayed away from Morning Service to make hot beef-and-kidney puddings. Shopping had to be done in Salisbury. This meant increased business for the carrier. But, unhappily, Alfred's *locum tenens* lacked the executive ability to cope successfully with a glut of orders.

In August, William Saint began a daily service to the county town. Peace fled, silently, from Mrs. Yellam's pillow.

In September, worse followed. Fortune, cruel jade, lashed out at Mrs. Yellam, striking her hard below the belt. Alfred's resplendent 'bus was knocked into a deep ditch by a huge Government trolley, which rolled serenely on—undamaged.

Et tu, Brute——!

Try to picture Mrs. Yellam's feelings. The 'bus was out of action. That in itself might be deemed a serious mishap, to use a word often in Nether-Applewhite mouths, a word applicable to murders, chicken-pox, frozen water-pipes and other domestic disasters. External and internal injuries to the car might be set right in six weeks or so. Skilled mechanics in Salisbury were overworked. No definite promise could be extracted from the firm that sold the 'bus to Alfred. But the driver, the middle-aged man whom, with all his faults, Mrs. Yellam had come to regard as a tower of sobriety and honesty, sustained concussion of the brain. He soon recovered from this but, alas! his nerve was gone. Obstinately, deaf to Fancy's coaxing and to Mrs. Yellam's trenchant protestations, he tendered notice. How could he be replaced?

By the time that the 'bus was in order again—insurance covered all damage—William Saint would have captured Alfred's faithful customers; the faithless were his already.

But what rankled so bitterly in Mrs. Yellam's heart, and would have provoked the Cæsarean apostrophe had she indulged in quotations from the Swan of Avon, was the tormenting reflection that the Army had dealt her this parlous blow, the Army she loved, because Alfred was part of it. Rampaging on, like a ruthless Juggernaut, the trolley had crashed into the 'bus, wiping it out, killing it and burying it in a ditch.

Sympathy flowed into the Yellam cottage from all points of the compass, a generous flood upon which Fancy floated buoyantly. Poor Mrs. Yellam sank beneath it, helplessly aware of its significance. Everybody, of course, knew that Alfred's business was bound up in the 'bus, ditched indefinitely, perhaps forever. The cynical thought obtruded itself, grinning derisively; help was proffered so eagerly, because it could not be accepted.

Satan had triumphed again.

Uncle was nearly as much upset as the 'bus. The gallant fellow offered his services to his sister.

"Look 'ee here, Susan. I be a man o' parts. 'Tis no trick for me to larn motor-drivin'. To use a figure o' speech, I be a born shover, clever, as you be, wi' my brain and my fingers. Such a thatcher as Habakkuk Mucklow be fit for anything. I feel it in me, dear, to command armies. Say the word, and I'll declare war wi' Saint Willum; I'll downscramble 'un in two jiffs."

Mrs. Yellam thanked him, but the word was not said.

She appeared to accept misfortune with grim resignation. Not even to Fancy dared she unveil her heart.

Alone with Solomon, she permitted a few words to escape.

"My faith, Solly, be on the wing again. Why should God Almighty raise His hand against an old 'ooman? He might ha' seen fit to cripple me wi' rheumatics. I could ha' borne that wi'out whimpering. But why do He exalt Willum Saint? That's what tears me, my dog."

Solomon spared no effort of mind or body in the attempt to assure his mistress that these high matters were apprehended by all dumb animals. Conscious of failure, he became very dejected.

A letter from Alfred heartened her a little.

"Dear Mother:" (he wrote) "I hope this finds you in the pink, as it leaves me. Don't worry about the old 'bus! *I don't, not a bit.* I have a notion that if you worry much 'twill be bad for Fancy and for Somebody Else, you know who I mean. As for William Saint, I say this —take a squint at his face! I wouldn't have his liver for the best carrying business in the world. If you've set your dear heart on my punching a rascal's head, I'll do it, so soon as I get back, and make a job of it, too. Hard blows hurt them as get them; hard thoughts hurt them as think them. I puzzled that out in the trenches, where we be making very merry again. You'll worry too about the loss of money. I say to that—*Napoo!* That's French. I parleyvoo with the best of them, but when it comes to buying stuff, they do me in a fair treat . . ."

Mrs. Yellam read and re-read the letter. Fancy was at the Court when it came. Then she said to Solomon:

"Wherever does that boy o' mine get his Christian principles? Not from me, Solly, not from me. Wag tail, little man, and I'll tell 'ee for why. Willum Saint, next Christmas, maybe, 'll take such a head to Salisbury as never was."

Sol barked.

Alfred's sentence about merry-making in the trenches provoked much thought. Mrs. Yellam had talked freely with scores of wounded Tommies. They came, they conquered all reserves, they went. Some actually complained that life in Nether-Applewhite seemed "dull" after the "fun" in the dug-outs. At first, she suspected "leg-pulling," but she limped to the slow conclusion that the high spirits of these gallant fellows came *from* the trenches, and were not, as she had supposed at first, a natural result of finding themselves snug and safe after shell-fire. Possessing the qualities which distinguish a "tufting" hound—a good nose for a scent, staying powers, and tenacity in sticking to her quarry, Mrs. Yellam decided, ultimately, that millions of young men and women were living, like gnats, for the passing hour, buzzing gaily here and there, utterly regardless of past and future.

Could she bring herself to so happy a condition of mind?

"Take no thought for the morrow."

That injunction couldn't be ignored. Nevertheless, she had ignored it all her life. Hence, from a material point of view, her sound economic condition. She was independent of the 'bus.

Such thoughts were obsessing, also, the parson of the parish.

Hamlin was quite as handicapped as Mrs. Yellam by principles adopted long ago which he deemed, before the

war, to be bomb-proof. He had pinned his faith to the masses, dismissing the classes as effete and lapped in luxury and indifference. All workers appealed to him irresistibly; men and women of leisure rather exasperated him. He held with Matthew Arnold that conduct was three-fourths of life, whereas culture might or might not claim the odd quarter.

The masses had disappointed him. The classes seemed to have justified their claim to superiority not in mere education but in a capacity and willingness to scrap self-interest which astounded him. He had expected, too, a tremendous upward movement from German Socialists. Indeed, he had regarded the Socialists of Europe as a band of brothers prepared to stand shoulder to shoulder against autocracy.

And they had not done so.

He could find for the masses, not at the front, all the excuses which fell so glibly from the lips of Democracy's champions. Strikers complained of lack of good faith on the part of the Government, of local injustices, of this and that, but the fact remained that self-interest swayed them, as it had swayed the privileged classes before the war. The tables seemed to be turned. Aristocracy, governed possibly by its fine motto, *"Noblesse oblige,"* hurled self-interest to the void; Democracy picked it up and hugged it. Indisputable evidence exhibited Labour as rejoicing in an increased wage, and spending pounds a week upon luxuries, many actually praying that the war might continue, because they believed that the end of it would mean a return to dull, grinding pre-war conditions.

And Hamlin admitted sorrowfully to himself that if the war did end suddenly, leaving Labour triumphant,

insatiate for more and more wealth, and in a position to dictate terms to Capital, that the country would be plunged into abysmal depths, depths in which new tyrants would impose a new slavery without any of the restrictions which culture and tradition had prescribed upon the former autocrats and plutocrats.

He envisaged England at the mercy of the mob!

With pleasure and relief he turned from the Industrials to the Soldiers. What a fine spirit animated them! With Mrs. Yellam, he had arrived, by a different road, at the same conclusion.

Our men of all ranks were facing unspeakable horrors with a laugh.

How had it come to pass?

According to Hamlin's teaching, a supreme Sacrifice, a Divine Atonement, had regenerated the pagan world. Did sacrifice make not only for regeneration but for joyousness? Lionel Pomfret, still on his crutches, was joyous. The Squire, after the sale of many heirlooms, was joyous. A finer humanity informed him, radiating from him.

The Parson pondered these things in his heart. He might have found another object-lesson in William Saint. He was unmistakably prospering, making money hand over fist. But he was not joyous.

Very reluctantly, Hamlin decided that the time for peace might be far distant, if the designs of Omnipotence were rightly apprehended by him. Armageddon would continue till pain had purged the whole world, till materialism in its hydraheaded forms was slain by spirituality, by a faith, simple as that preached by the Nazarene, which counted worldly gain as naught if such gain involved the loss of the soul.

Faithful to his promise to Alfred, Hamlin kept a watchful eye on Mrs. Yellam. Her empty pew had affected him poignantly. He thought of empty pews throughout Europe. They stood mute witnesses against teachers and preachers, against creeds that crumbled when the cannon thundered. He respected this old woman for braving gossip by staying at home. She had moral courage, nearly as rare and even more precious than common-sense. But when she came back to her pew, when he heard her loud responses, he realised sadly that her son, not her God, had found this wandering sheep and led it back to the fold.

At any moment the pew might be empty again.

Next Sunday, he took for his text the verse out of the hundredth-and-sixth Psalm:

"And He gave them their desire; but withal He sent leanness into their soul."

No coincidence was involved in this choice of a text. Fancy Broomfield, before she married, had asked her master to explain "leanness of soul." He had said a few simple words. Afterwards, he jotted down some notes and put them away.

He re-read these notes, thinking of William Saint, whose activities had not escaped his notice. But he wrote the sermon with a wider application. And although he had to bear in mind the limited intelligence of his congregation, what he set down constituted an indictment of a material, world-wide prosperity.

Hamlin began by reminding his parishioners of what he had said in his sermon on patriotism: the soul in its essence was always right.

"What there is of it," he added impressively. "Some souls are very lean."

Jane Mucklow maintained afterwards that the Parson looked hard at Uncle. Uncle was equally positive that austere eyes dwelt on Jane. Mrs. Yellam sat bolt upright in her pew with Fancy beside her. William Saint assumed an air of detachment. He attended church once a week to curry favour with his Squire and landlord. He held Hamlin in some disdain, because so able a man had pushed himself no farther along preferment's highway than Nether-Applewhite. A man who had played cricket for the Gentlemen of England ought surely to be a dean at least, if he had any gumption in him.

Hamlin repeated the text.

"I want you to notice," he said, in his quiet voice, "that the word 'soul' is used in the singular. God sent leanness into the soul of His people. Nations, therefore, like individuals, possess souls.

"Has leanness entered into our national soul?

"We have prospered exceedingly. We are even richer than our expert accountants deemed us to be. Some of you may have glanced casually at the stupendous figures which set forth the wealth and resources of the British Empire. We forget to consider how this vast wealth is piled up. It is not my purpose to consider that with you, to-day. But such consideration is the duty of those who are able to deal intelligently with these astounding figures.

"We have been, in short, given our desire.

"In the text you will note that God gave His people their desire; and then He sent leanness into their souls.

"What was their desire? The Psalmist informs us in the context. God's Chosen People had wandered

from Him. They had corrupted themselves, as we read in Exodus. I will cite one instance known to the youngest child here: they had set up and worshipped the calf of Horeb, the golden calf, which has stood forth ever since as the symbol of Mammon, the symbol of material prosperity. They wanted this golden calf, and God gave it to them. And then He sent leanness into their soul.

"To many of us this text presents difficulties. Is it wrong for a nation to desire worldly prosperity? Is it wrong for an individual, for any one of us, to desire to better one's condition in life, to rise, as it is called, in the world? Most certainly not. Such a desire is firmly rooted in every healthy nation, in every healthy man and woman. It is basic, the mainspring of human endeavour and human advancement, rooted in nations and individuals by God.

"The desire, then, in its simplest form, must be right. Its accomplishment may be utterly wrong.

"Desires change their character during accomplishment. Thrift, for instance, may degenerate into parsimony; temperance, if uncontrolled, leads to intemperance; the noblest ambitions may become insensate; proper care of the body, which I have commended to you, may end in vanity; love, alas! is often deformed into lust. All that is obvious. Nobody here questions it.

"Desires, then, face two ways. They may lead us to God or away from Him; they may enrich or impoverish the soul.

"But why, you may ask, does God, as in the text, deliberately gratify soul-impoverishing desires in a nation, with the knowledge and therefore with the intention of making the soul of that nation lean?

"The answer is plain. Nations, like individuals, exer-

cise the privilege of free-will. The choice between good and evil is theirs, as it is mine, and yours.

"How can we tell whether the soul of a nation be lean?

"There is an infallible test, the same test which each of us must apply to ourselves. Never forget that what we think, we are. What we go on thinking, we become. By a nation's thoughts, by your own thoughts, the soul's stature may be measured. If the thoughts of a nation, if your own thoughts, dwell habitually upon self-advancement and self-indulgence, be sure that the soul is dwindling instead of expanding. If our thoughts, collectively or individually, are hard, jealous thoughts concerning other nations, the soul is growing lean. But when we think of others with love animating our thoughts, and if that love, in ever-widening circles, includes not only our friends but all, all who claim from us pity and consideration, then it is very well with the soul. It is expanding, and it is capable of an expansion so immense that, like Time and Space, no finite mind can measure it. Hate impoverishes souls and bodies. A man under the influence of violent passion is physically the worse. Any doctor will tell you that. A nation convulsed by hate is physically weaker. Violence is not strength. It may appear to be so for a brief time. In a stand-up fight, between two men, the man who loses his temper is likely to lose the victory. At this moment, a gospel of hate is convulsing our enemies. We may, and must, hate what they have done, the atrocious crimes perpetrated by and for Authority, but let us beware of hating, as they hate, because such rancour eats away the soul. Let us remember Who said: 'God forgive them, for they know not what they do!'

"Let us consider more attentively the desires of a nation and their direction—upward or downward. I repeat emphatically that the desires of a nation are the desires of the individual immeasureably multiplied.

"And, first, I should like to suggest to you that desires concerned with material ends, such as money, or any other worldly ambition, are generally gratified, provided we work for them hard enough.

"When are desires soul-impoverishing? How can we tell when a nation or an individual, after rising steadily upward, reaches a point from which they and he, as steadily, descend?

"The answer may be found in the Book of Micah: 'He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good, and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

"In itself a nation can achieve much, so can an individual; but if self-advancement, in any form, whether modest or far-reaching, relies upon itself and takes to itself the credit and glory, then we are not walking humbly with God, but speeding from Him along a road that may lead to success, as the world interprets success, but which leads, also, to disappointment, disillusionment, and often at the last—despair.

"The great conquerors of history have not been happy men.

"Everything that is done vaingloriously turns to ashes. From that sad thought we may take this much consolation. Ashes, as you farmers know, are great fertilisers. I know of no greater proof of God's wisdom and mercy than this: the ashes of our failures do, so I believe, cause good to bloom out of evil.

"If it be true that leanness has been sent into the soul

of this nation, if we have not walked humbly with God, what can be done? The answer is to be found not only in the Bible, but in every chapter of the world's history. We must make atonement by sacrifice."

He paused, and many remembered that pause afterwards. The preacher stood erect, but his eyes were not on the congregation. They looked out dreamily into a world in anguish. Tears trickled down Fancy's cheeks. With her quick sensibilities, she divined that the Parson's thoughts had flown to France, where his Benjamin was fighting, not in hate, none who knew the boy could believe that, but inspired by the faith that a selfless Cause would triumph. Instantly, her own thoughts flew to Alfred. If—if sacrifice were demanded of her—? She looked up. Some intuition told her that Hamlin was ready for any sacrifice. His face appeared calm. But she became aware of tension, as if a far-seeing man were braced against impending calamity. She recalled stories current in the village after the *Lusitania* was torpedoed: stories of men who had confronted death without a tremor. Surely, at such a moment God stood with them.

Would He stand with her, if Alfred did not come back?

She stole a glance at Mrs. Yellam.

Her face remained impassive. But again intuition told Fancy that this outward calmness masked bitter trouble and perplexity. Timidly she slipped her hand into the hand of the old woman, pressing it gently. The pressure was not returned, because, perhaps, it may not have been felt. Mrs. Yellam, Fancy perceived, was staring at a mural tablet to the right of the pulpit, new and shining brass upon which were inscribed the names of two nephews of Captain Davenant. He had read the

Lessons, as usual, but in a less rasping voice, so she had thought. She heard Hamlin's quiet tones:

"Let us prepare ourselves for greater sacrifices."

The rest of the sermon was devoted to particular rather than general ends. The Parson appealed, as was his wont, to the children, and the younger members of the congregation, the twigs waiting to be inclined. And to these his appeal was persuasive and suggestive, never didactic or minatory. He shone best when conducting a children's service, when he walked amongst them using the simplest words.

Perhaps he knew that the middle-aged and old could be touched to finer issues indirectly. In every heart, however worn and tired, there lingers a subtle fragrance of youth which thought of youth releases. The sad fact that many of the elder people were mourning may have tempered what speech he addressed to them, and many of them were aware of this, shifting uneasily in their pews as they remembered similar words spoken in the same place by the same man twenty years back.

Once more, Mrs. Yellam walked home in silence. Fancy, engrossed by her own thoughts, did not speak till they entered the cottage. Then she said, hesitatingly:

"'Tis strange. We talked of lean souls the first day Alfie brought me to see you."

"Ay—so we did."

"And afterwards I asked Mr. Hamlin to tell me what 'lean souls' meant."

"Did 'ee? He never looked once at me this marning."

"Why should he?"

Mrs. Yellam answered heavily:

"I dunno. But I'd a notion that he had me in mind. 'Twas a notable sermon, but——"

"Yes?"

"He ain't been tried as I have."

She went upstairs slowly to take off her bonnet and shawl.

Upon the following Wednesday, the sermon assumed a fresh importance and significance.

Edward Hamlin was killed in action.

CHAPTER XVI

SAINT WILLUM

IT was a blow over the heart to Nether-Applewhite. Master Teddy, as everybody called him, had grown to man's estate amongst the villagers, but he was remembered as a boy, full of pranks, a bit of a scapegrace, with a smile that Uncle affirmed to be "so good as sixpence." Uncle assumed a band of crêpe, and said to Susan Yellam:

"Master Teddy be taken, and us useless old sticks be left. I taught 'un to set night lines. He'd a tang o' the poacher, he had, but allers ready to give away what trout he catched out o' old Captain's water. Bold as brass, too, wi' rich or poor. And a good fighter. He fit 'No Account Harry' back o' village pound, and licked 'un, too, a boy bigger'n older'n he. A pleasant word for all, and fair bustin' wi' fun and kindness. I tell 'ee this, I be so sorrowful as if I'd lost a son, but there's rejoicing where he be gone. I can see Saint Peter a-openin' wide the gate to let 'un in."

Greater orators have declaimed less sincere funeral orations.

Mrs. Yellam said little. Her troubled face made Fancy unhappy. But when she spoke of Edward Hamlin, Mrs. Yellam cut her short:

"He be gone. It don't bear speaking of. Why should such as he be sacrificed to atone for our sins?"

"If God gave His Only Son——!"

"Ah-h-h! That be it. *If* . . ."

"Mother!"

"You be shocked, and no wonder. But unless I speaks what I feels to 'ee, I must hold my tongue. And more decent, too. I be mazed beyond words. I be losing my grip o' this world and the next."

Fancy met Hamlin two days afterwards as she was leaving Pomfret Court. She quickened her step, but he stopped still. She said simply:

"I be so grieved about Mr. Edward. He was so full of life."

Hamlin took her hand.

"Thank you. The sympathy of all of you is much to me, more than you think." He paused adding slowly: "He may be fuller of life, Fancy, where he is now."

She went her way, strangely comforted. Her time was approaching. Soon she must remain at home, awaiting her ordeal. She confronted that with the courage which is so often the attribute of physically frail women. The month before the wonderful event would be happily occupied in making the *layette* or such of it as Mrs. Yellam couldn't provide; and Fancy had in mind the lining and trimming of a baby-basket fit for a tiny prince. She intended to embroider a broad blue riband with this legend: "To my little son." She made absolutely certain that the child would be a son. Already she had envisaged his life from the cradle to the grave. She wouldn't allow him to play too rough games, but he must be a *Man;* she shrank from what he would have to go through before he attained his sire's stature; she rehearsed a prayer suitable for babbling lips; she arrayed him in knickerbockers and despatched him to school, with many

injunctions not to play truant, or pull the hair of small girls, or be pert to his teacher. Of course, he would be just such a son to her as Alfred was to his mother. She went so far in mental vagabondage as to choose a wife for him, a very practical young woman with a reassuring physique, quite unlike herself. Being his father's son, every inch of him, it was certain that he would have "affairs" with other young women before he chose the "One and Only." Fancy meant to deal faithfully with such flirtations. One of them would nearly capture the youth. He would be saved from a too audacious baggage by his mother! She hoped that he would not be too good, but full of fun, like Mr. Edward. He would be a carrier, because all wars would be over and done with after this war.

These were her day-dreams.

At night, she was not so happy. At night she thought much of Mrs. Yellam. That troubled face formed itself in the dark, mutely entreating comfort and counsel which Fancy could not evoke out of her eagerness to help a sorely-stricken creature.

Why did Mrs. Yellam borrow trouble?

Why did she believe that God had forsaken her? What a terrible notion this of Satan supreme and triumphant in Nether-Applewhite! But she had faith in God's mercy. He would lift this black cloud from a poor old woman's heart.

About two weeks after Edward Hamlin's death, unexpected balm, very precious spikenard, was poured upon Mrs. Yellam's lacerated feelings. William Saint had got his desire and leanness of soul withal. Alfred's good business was his. When he drove past the Yellam cottage, Mrs. Yellam turned her face from the window, if

she happened to be there. She told Uncle that she discerned a mocking smile, a contemptuous upper lip, upon that hard, yellow face. Uncle nodded, saying nothing. But leaving his sister's house, he laid a couple of fingers upon his biceps as he contracted the muscles of it. He smiled genially. His biceps still swelled hard and big as a cricket ball. And only the day before he had been out running with the hounds. William Saint did not run. He walked to his objectives, the sort of tortoise, Uncle reflected, who wins prizes from the more nimble hare.

He was so pleasant with Jane that she suspected a frontal attack upon her money-box. Uncle, however, impetrated no loan. Later in the afternoon, when she went to the fowl-house to collect eggs, she surprised her lord and master, with his coat off, vigorously punching a sack of bran in the shed that adjoined the chicken-run.

"Whatever be you doing?" she asked.

Uncle grinned.

"I be working off some ale, Jane. So thin stuff it be that I wants to get rid of it quick."

"I thought you was gone mad."

"Ah-h-h! Others may think that afore we be much older."

To her further amazement, Uncle remained at home that evening instead of going to the *Sir John Barleycorn*. She wondered if he were sickening for an illness. Possibly, the Parson's sermon on lean souls had affected him. Presently Uncle's earnest words lent colour to this possibility. He observed didactically:

"Hate be bad for the body. Parson got that notion from me. A man as hates his feller-men, and lies awake nights plottin' and plannin' evil, bain't never a fighter."

"How about they Proosians?"

Uncle riposted gaily:

"I hain't one to misparage the enemy, but from what I hears, and you knows I hears more than most, they Proosians fights wi' wallopin' big guns, not wi' fisteses."

"Who's talking o' fisteses?"

"I be., I reckons as a man past sixty might well stand up to a Proosian not more'n thirty."

"You ain't never thinking of enlisting, Habakkuk?"

"No, no. I couldn't leave 'ee, Jane."

"You takes keer o' yourself for my sake. I knows that. What be you thinking of?"

"You'll know soon enough, old girl. I minds that time when I bruised meself so bad slidin' off a slippery roof bang on to a stone wall. You rubbed in some wonnerful stuff. Any of it left?"

"Lard help us! I knew you'd miss your ale. You bain't never thinking o' drinking Helliman's Embrocation?"

"Not yet. Have you the bottle handy?"

Jane nodded; Uncle relapsed into silence, broken by rumblings and chucklings. He went to bed early and slept soundly.

Next afternoon, at four, he entered the sanded bar of Saint's tavern. Saint drove his 'bus to Salisbury upon alternate days. He had a man to take his place upon the other days when business kept him at home. Behind the bar stood a fresh-coloured young woman, quick of tongue and hand, floridly good-looking, with very alert eyes. Gossip affirmed that she was secretly engaged to Saint. Jane Mucklow remarked that the hussy ought to be, if she wasn't. Uncle greeted her pleasantly, nodded to those present, called for a tankard of ale, and en-

quired tenderly after Saint Willum. The young woman frowned. Then she said sharply:

"I've a mind to tell you something."

The company present pricked ears. Uncle smiled, drawing himself up, inflating his chest, quite ready for a preliminary spar.

"You tell it, my girl. 'Tis crool to think o' what wimmen-folk suffer from allers holding their tongues."

"Your tongue is too sharp. Mr. Saint is civil to you. Be civil to him. That's all."

She drew his ale, and handed it to him.

Uncle looked at her with twinkling eyes. She was making things easy for him, and he felt quite grateful to her. She had fired the first shot. This might or might not be used as a *casus belli*. He said, meaningly:

"Be that advice or a warning like?"

"Take it as both, Mr. Mucklow."

"I will. Now, tell me this, my girl; be you speaking for yourself, or for your master? If you be speaking for yourself, I be minded to tell 'ee that you be paid to serve customers, and not to improve their manners. If you be speaking for Willum Saint, I thanks you very kindly and passes no more remarks."

This, it will be admitted, was a crafty speech on Uncle's part, and pleased him mightily. The girl was sure to resent a rebuke before others, and already the gaffers were grinning at her. If she shifted responsibility to Saint Willum, a *casus belli* had been established. The young woman lacked Uncle's *finesse*. She answered sullenly:

"I spoke up for Mr. Saint, because he's not here to speak for himself."

Uncle felt that this was not satisfactory enough, although promising.

"You means," he said incisively, "that you speaks words which your master bain't man enough to speak for hisself, either to my face or behind me back?"

The derisive intonation placed upon "master" brought a flush to the girl's cheek. Her eyes sparkled. And she believed Saint to be a man.

"If you want it straight," she retorted, "the words I used have been spoken by Mr. Saint and others."

"Thank 'ee," said Uncle, lifting his tankard. "I drinks to your good health, miss. Cheer oh! as our dear lads say."

He buried his nose in the tankard. But he drank little in it, carrying it to the stout oak table near the fire. The gaffers testified afterwards, that Uncle's talk, before Saint came in, was even more genial and easy than usual. And Saint's face, when he appeared, was in marked contrast to Uncle's rubicund cheerful countenance. Obviously Saint was out of temper. He had been cited to appear before the local tribunal again, and exemption might not be granted twice. "Comb-out" articles were appearing in the daily press. And Saint, who tapped private sources of information, was well aware that Captain Davenant, Chairman of the Board, had expressed a strong opinion that Saint, a Class A fellow, b'George! ought to be kicked into the ranks. Saint had just begun to realise, also, that he was hoist with his own petard. Alfred Yellam, as carrier, set a precedent, shewing that carriers could find less able-bodied men to transact necessary local business.

Uncle looked hard at him.

"What's wrong, Saint Willum?" he asked, in the

drawling tone that always provoked a cackle from the gaffers.

Saint looked hard at Uncle. He had good reason for knowing that Uncle saw eye to eye with the Captain. Before entering the bar, the landlord of the *Sir John Barleycorn* had drunk some whisky from a bottle which he kept locked up in his bedroom. In a word, he was ripe for a quarrel.

"What's wrong?" he repeated viciously. "You are. I'm fed up with your insolence. You take yourself off to the *Pomfret Arms*. The landlord there may want your money and your sauce. I've had enough of both."

The young woman smiled. If, as she expected, and not without good reason, William Saint became her husband, he might turn out, with discreet handling, a docile helpmeet. Within twenty-four hours, she had urged him to "out" Habakkuk Mucklow at the first opportunity. Saint had hesitated, observing angrily that he detested Uncle, and would gladly attend his funeral. At the same time, the man brought custom to the tavern. If he left it, some of his cronies might leave with him. Whereupon the young woman remarked scornfully: "If you can stick it, I've nothing more to say." And then she had eyed him slowly from heel to head, as if taking stock of an animal not quite sound. Saint knew that his manhood had been challenged by a woman who was becoming indispensable to him.

Uncle rose, tankard in hand. His smile was so disarming that Saint, probably, believed him to be harmless. Accordingly he scowled the more fiercely as Uncle slowly approached him. An expert of the prize ring, comparing the two men physically, would have said, off-hand, that age could never fight youth on equal terms. Saint was

stoutly built, heavy in the shoulder, with good underpinning. He may have lacked two inches of Uncle's height.

Uncle feigned nervousness, luring Saint on. Had the landlord been perfectly sober, he might have suspected guile. Whisky had inflamed his mind and paralysed his judgment.

"Don't 'ee talk that way, Mr. Saint. I be old enough to be your father. And not the man I was."

Saint exploded.

"If you don't walk out, I'll kick you out."

Uncle almost cooed at him.

"What brave words to an old gaffer past sixty! And before ladies, too."

The sly emphasis on "ladies" provoked a titter from a granfer warmed by hot ale.

Saint sprang to the attack. Now, Uncle, the sly old campaigner, had foreseen this opening. He knew well enough the advantage of a first blow. He knew, also, that Saint, out of condition as he was, might end a fight at close quarters in thirty seconds. Within one minute, so Uncle reckoned, Saint would have lost fifty per cent of energy and endurance. With a gay laugh he dashed the ale he had so valiantly refrained from drinking in Saint's face.

"That'll cool 'ee," said Uncle, as he side-stepped as gracefully as a dancing-master.

Saint was half-blinded, but now well aware that Uncle meant business. He must "finish" him at once, inflict a "knock-out" blow. He charged again, head down, like an infuriated bull. Sober reflection might have warned him that Uncle's arms were longer than his. Uncle raised the tankard and brought it down hard upon a

thick skull. Saint fell to the floor, stunned. The young woman screamed out:

"You've killed him!"

Uncle laughed pleasantly:

"Not me. I only tapped 'un. Don't 'ee be afeard, my dear. He'll live to make 'ee miserable. I hopes as I ain't hurt this handsome tankard." He examined it. "No. 'Tis ale-tight yet. I sees a dent though. 'Twill serve, like rosemary, for remembrance. Ah-h-h! He be comin' to."

Saint raised his head, but remained huddled up on the sanded floor, rubbing his head and staring at the grinning faces about him. Uncle addressed him with courtesy.

"Willum Saint, I be a marciful man. There be many here as could testify and swear by the Book as you assaulted and batteried me, but I won't have the law on 'ee. More, never again will I call 'ee Saint Willum. For why?—your immortial soul be too lean. I means to call 'ee, after this memorable day, Mr. Sinner. And now, Mr. Sinner, I takes myself off to the *Pomfret Arms*, and my friends go wi' me."

Three out of the five other men rose solemnly, and called for their reckoning. The two that remained might have done so had they possessed cash in their pockets.

Uncle took off his hat to the young woman, and bowed politely:

"Good-bye, miss. If he become too rampagious, do 'ee whisper 'tankard' to 'un."

Uncle did not walk straight to the *Pomfret Arms*; he fetched a compass, calling upon Mrs. Yellam. He told his tale without embellishment. Susan threw back her head and laughed. Then she kissed her brother.

"Habakkuk," she said solemnly, "'twas a gert victory for you, *and for me,* over Satan."

Next day, by the luck of things, Saint met Uncle face to face in the village street.

"You downed me last night, because I wasn't sober."

"Drunk *and* disorderly!" exclaimed Uncle, raising his voice so that others might hear. "What would Squire say, if so be as you came afore the Bench?"

Saint was perfectly sober and smugly self-possessed.

"You couldn't down me this morning."

"I be willing to try," said Uncle, perceiving that he had room for side-stepping. "You takes your coat off and I takes off mine, and we goes at it, here and now, slam-bang."

Saint declined this cordial invitation. He scowled at Uncle, and went his way.

Next Sunday Mrs. Yellam's responses were half a second ahead of the congregation. On the Saturday Fancy had received a long letter from Alfred. He was out of the danger zone again, and in a rest camp with his men, who "groused" at "fatigues" imposed upon them unreasonably. Alfred reported himself sound of left arm, and, as usuel, "in the pink." William Saint did not attend Divine Service, thinking, possibly, that a large strip of plaster across his head might distract the attention of the congregation. In this he was needlessly thoughtful, inasmuch as everybody in the parish knew what had happened in the sanded tap-room, and acclaimed Uncle as the true sire of a valorous son. Uncle sat in his pew, as upright as Mrs. Yellam, inviting inspection with an upward cock of one eyebrow, as much as to say:

"Look at me, neighbours. Not a mark on me!"

You may be sure that the Squire had the epic pat from the lips of Captain Davenant, to whom Uncle had recited it when shooting in the New Forest. More, the Captain made it clear to the Autocrat how insidiously Alfred Yellam had been undermined by "Mr. Sinner." Finally, it was decided between them that William Saint would serve his country to better advantage away from Nether-Applewhite, and the Squire, gravely affected by Susan Yellam's troubles, swore that he would personally see to it that Alfred's carrying business should be resurrected. On Monday morning, Mrs. Yellam, upon arrival at the Court, was informed that Sir Geoffrey wished to see her in his room. For a terrible moment, she feared that the Squire might be about to break bad news of Alfred. A glance at his jolly face reassured her.

"Sit you down, Susan. Make yourself comfortable. What about a glass of port?"

Mrs. Yellam associated port with funerals. She declined any liquid refreshment, very politely. The Squire stood upon the hearth-rug, beneath the portrait of his father, and thrust his hands in his breeches' pockets.

"Now, Susan, where is Alfred's 'bus?"

"In Salisbury, Sir Geoffrey."

"Out of dry dock? Ready for the road—um?"

"I believe so, Sir Geoffrey, but Willum Saint has the business; and I don't know where to turn for a man."

"That's going to be my affair. I should have made it my affair, if you had come to me without my sending for you. Alfred has been treated abominably. All the facts never reached my ears till yesterday, when I heard about Uncle and the tankard."

He laughed, and Susan laughed with him. The Squire waxed confidential.

"Just between us, let it go no further, William Saint will be called up."

"The Lard be praised! This be heartsome news, Sir Geoffrey. If you gets me a man, trade'll come back."

"You rest easy. I repeat, all this is my affair. I'm still Squire of Nether-Applewhite. Have you seen my grandson lately?"

"No, Sir Geoffrey."

"You come along with me to the nursery, and we'll have a squint at him. He's a whopper."

And thus the sun shone bright once more in Mrs. Yellam's heaven. The Squire proved even better than his word. What he said in private to William Saint was never known. Sir Geoffrey found, for Mrs. Yellam, a reliable driver, an ex-soldier discharged from the army but not disabled, with a merry eye and a persuasive tongue. Saint's 'bus went to the station, as before, not to Salisbury.

You may think of this time as the St. Martin's Summer of Mrs. Yellam's life. The dull November days drifted by, bringing with them mist and rain and wind; the trees were stripped of their leaves; Nature sang her requiem for the dying year; but Pentecostal joys filled Mrs. Yellam's heart.

And this Feast of Rejoicing affected Fancy and her child. The Yellam cottage became a heat-centre. From it radiated warming beams. Susan, at work in her kitchen, could hear Fancy"s clear voice singing "Abide with Me."

Hold Thou Thy Cross before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom, and point me to the skies:

Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me!"

If it were only so, reflected Mrs. Yellam, how rich and happy life would be, with all its ups and downs. She remained obstinately convinced that she wanted the Lord to abide with her. It was He Who left her so mysteriously. And then, of course, Satan took the vacant place. She examined herself rigorously. She dealt justly with her neighbours; she loved mercy; she read her Bible each day. What more could she do? Really and truly, she demanded so little of Omnipotence—not wealth, not even health, for, at her age, she must expect aches and pains; just peace, only that, and Alfred.

CHAPTER XVII

FOOL-WISDOM

FANCY'S approaching confinement aroused no apprehensions in the mind of Mrs. Yellam. She took it for granted that nothing untoward would happen. Probably, the doctor in attendance would make things appear more serious than they were. Deep down in her heart lay the conviction that doctors, in their own interests, pursed up lips and bent frowning brows over sick-beds, because when their patients pulled through the greater credit attached itself to them. Her own confinements had been reasonably easy, so she told Fancy.

Both women wondered whether Alfred would get his Christmas leave and his Christmas present at the same time. That double event, however, lay upon the knees of the gods.

Leave or no leave, Mrs. Yellam told herself that Alfred was safe till the Spring. Why this conviction came to her she did not explain. Had you asked her, she would have replied, probably, that the wounded boys at the Court affirmed nothing to be doing in mid-winter. The sight of William Saint in khaki nearly made her break into song. The banns of his approaching marriage to the young person behind the bar were called in Nether-Applewhite Church, none too soon, according to Jane Mucklow. Uncle was heard to whisper, "And sarve 'un right!" by neighbours in adjoining pews. He as-

sured his cronies that Mr. Sinner's punishment was to come. Susan rejoiced, also, in the notable fact that Nether-Applewhite harboured no conscientious objectors. Ocknell, the next parish, was not so fortunate.

In fine, the first half of December glided by swiftly and pleasantly. Alfred's business became firmly re-established, and, with Saint no longer competing, more remunerative than ever. Mrs. Yellam said to Fancy:

"Your child, seemin'ly, may be rich."

She refused to speak of the child as a son. But Fancy's conviction about that remained impregnable.

"I ought to know, Mother."

"Maybe. But you don't. Nobody knows."

"Alfred wants him to be a girl."

"Do he? I wonders why."

"He said a little maid would traipse so nicely after you. I promised him to call her Lizzie. She'll be the next."

"Lizzie! Ah-h-h! Alferd be a good son. Fancy his thinkin' o' that. Lizzie——!"

She spoke the name almost under her breath. A moment later, she removed her spectacles, and wiped them. The two women were sitting in the kitchen by the hearth, after supper. A basket held the logs. The cradle was upstairs in Mrs. Yellam's room. In that room, despite Fancy's protests, Alfred's child would be born. In that room Susan Yellam's first baby had wailed his regret at finding himself in a wicked world. In that room her husband had died. Everything lay ready to hand; the monthly nurse lived only a quarter of a mile away; the doctor had been advised that he might be wanted at any minute.

Fancy loved to sit over the fire, listening to the wind

talking to the chimney, telling that stay-at-home the tale of many wanderings. She liked to make-believe that the winds were real persons, although she had never heard of Æolus and his rebellious prisoners. She hated to pick flowers because they must feel so unhappy out of their own garden. Of course, they died of loneliness in mid-Victorian vases. She held inviolate her faith in fairies, beneficent and malevolent. She assured Mrs. Yellam that Solomon could see pixies dancing in their rings. How else could you account for his stopping in the middle of a field and barking?

Of her mother and the four Evangelists she said nothing.

Uncle and she became great friends.

Three days out of the week (as has been mentioned), from October to the end of January, Uncle served as "beater" to Captain Davenant, when that veteran went shooting in the New Forest. Returning home, about five, Uncle liked to wander into Mrs. Yellam's cottage and drink a cup of tea instead of marching up to the *Pomfret Arms*, where his supremacy as a talker and man of the world might be disputed by certain bagmen in that inn, which prided itself upon being "more class" than the *Sir John Barleycorn*. Fancy paid homage to Uncle, as the favourite brother of Mrs. Yellam, ministering to his love of creature comforts, making hot buttered toast and putting cream into his tea, which he never got at home. Whenever Jane happened to be "miffed" her husband tactically retreated to what he now termed "Fancy's rest camp." He found her alone there, because Mrs. Yellam was now on duty at Pomfret Court from two till seven. Fancy and Uncle would sit by the fire and talk.

Fool-Wisdom

Between Uncle's house and the Yellam cottage stood a clump of firs, near the river. Each year, during the annual migration, ospreys, probably southward bound from Scotland, would roost for one night only in these firs. Uncle had watched them many a time. They would circle three times round the firs and then alight upon them. Always the young birds, that year's nestlings, would come first. The parent birds followed, perhaps two days later. The sense of direction, the triple circling round the same trees, on the part of young birds, who preceded their parents, filled Fancy with astonishment. Being urban, she delighted in Uncle's Arcadian lore. She asked him to explain this amazing performance.

"Birds be wiser than we, my girl."

Alfred had made the same remark about water-rats.

"How do they find their way, Uncle?"

"Ah-h-h! How does a young hound find his way back to kennels, when he be taken to a distant meet by train, to new country never seen afore? You answer me that."

"I can't. Can you?"

"I thinks I can. 'Tis fool-wisdom. Wimmenfolk has it, because they be nearer to the animals than we men."

Fancy wondered whether this was to be taken as a compliment. Uncle continued:

"Fool-wisdom comes from God A'mighty. We be told that He don't forget one sparrer. I never liked sparrers too well, because they interferes crool wi' the house-martins, pore lil' dears. Yas—God A'mighty guides they young ospreys. I've a notion that He'd guide us if so be as we weren't so set on guiding ourselves. That be the main trouble wi' my dear sister."

Fancy opened her eyes wide,

"What are you saying, Uncle?"

"I be fool-wise, my girl. I sees that you be mazed. Fool-wisdom be what we read on in the Holy Book, the sart that God A'mighty gives to babes and sucklings. My dear sister be full o' man's wisdom, just so clever as a man can be. She takes credit to herself for every big onion in her garden."

Fancy said slily:

"But, Uncle, you took credit for George getting the Victoria Cross."

"So I did. A sharp 'un you be, for sartain. 'Tis true. Where would pore Garge be if I hadn't begotten 'un? And 'twas my brave will as sent 'un to Salisbury to enlist. But I gives the Lard the credit for pickin' such a man as I be for Garge's father. And Garge's valorous deed was a marvellous miracle upsides wi' they young ospreys findin' their way to our clump o' firs."

"You ought to be a preacher, Uncle."

"Ah-h-h! 'Tis easy for me to preach, allers was; but practisin' be the devil. Me and Pa'son be o' the same mind about that. But how I be wanderin' from my text! We was talkin' of fool-wisdom and your dear mother-in-law."

"She's my mother now."

"Ay. And I bain't fit to black her boots when it comes to practisin'. I knows that. But she ain't got fool-wisdom, as I calls it."

Fancy considered this attentively. Uncle puffed at his pipe, glancing at Fancy's pensive face. He saw that he had puzzled her, and pulled himself together for another effort.

"'Tis like this. Susan be proud because she thinks as she walks wi' God A'mighty. She takes credit for

that, pore soul! Now, I be proud and so humble as a bee when the Lard sees fit to walk wi' me. That be my fool-wisdom, Fancy."

"I see."

And she did. Uncle's naïve remarks were illuminating. She could look back, by the light of fool-wisdom, and sort out innumerable, half-forgotten trifles, unconsidered at the time, which corroborated, almost disconcertingly, this—what could she call it? Yes—vainglorious-ness on the part of Mrs. Yellam. Another word, in every-day use amongst the "boys," bustled into her mind —"swank." She smiled. It seemed a wicked word to apply to such a majestic woman, and yet it was just right. Mrs. Yellam did "swank" whenever she talked of herself or Alfred. She had won first prize for the best village garden at the annual Flower Show, discontinued since the outbreak of war, because, so she told Fancy, she tended her vegetables herself. Alfred's robust health, his sobriety, his capacity for steady work, his churchgoing, his pleasant manners with neighbours—all these were feathers in Mrs. Yellam's cap, placed there by herself! She was set on guiding herself and others, admittedly a leader. Uncle was right. His dear sister did not walk humbly with the Lord. Hamlin's sermon had not been forgotten by Fancy. His son's death had made it an imperishable memory. And Mrs. Yellam, it will be recalled, had shrewdly suspected that the Parson had aimed a shaft or two at her. Had he? Could it be possible that this wonderful old woman's soul was lean? Naturally Fancy shrank from such a conclusion.

To lighten her mind, and with the intention of extracting more fool-wisdom from Uncle, she said mischievously:

"Uncle——?"

"Yas, my dear——?"

"What takes a man to the alehouse? Fool-wisdom?"

Uncle threw back his handsome head and roared with laughter. But fool-wisdom told him that this was the right way to tackle a backslider. What a pity that Jane disdained indirect methods! He shook a long forefinger in a smiling face.

"You lil' besom——! Now, if Alferd ever takes a notion to drink more ale than be strictly needful to slake a pleasant thirst, you poke just such fun at 'un, and smile at 'un, as you be smilin' at an old sinner this minute. My wife be a good, faithful 'ooman, but vartue wi' her be turned sourish, like that there clarety wine, the only liquor as never did lie easy on my good stomach. Maybe I married her latish in life. And cooks, from stewin' over fire, do seem to overbake their livers and lights. Anyways, hard looks drive a man to alehouse; smiles keep 'un at home. I admits to you, Fancy, but never a word to Jane, mind 'ee, that ale be my weakness. 'Twould be blasphemious to say that the Lard ever walked wi' me *to* an ale-house, except on one very notable occasion, but 'tis a fact that in His Marcy He have walked wi' me *from* the *Sir John Barleycorn*. And now you has it."

"Tell me about the notable exception."

"Ah-h-h! You knows. The Lard walked wi' me when I downscrambled Willum Saint. I gives He the credit. He put the notion into my head o' flingin' Willum's ale into Willum's face, and bashin' 'un wi' his own tankard. I tell 'ee that notion come to me bang from Kingdom Come. My own notion was different. I calkilated on a stand-up fight. Willum might ha' downed me, being

so young and strong a man. And I tells 'ee more, a lil' secret, seein' as you has the trick o' squeezin' secrets out o' sinners: the Lard walks wi' me when I comes here to see you. And I be drinkin' less ale in consekence."

With that he kissed Fancy and took his leave.

Solomon jumped into the warm, cushioned arm-chair. But, instead of curling himself up, he walked three times round the chair, and then sat up, with his head on one side glancing interrogatively at Fancy, as much as to say:

"If you want fool-wisdom, why not tap it at its source?"

Fancy eyed him reflectively. All day, the dog had behaved strangely. He never left Fancy for a moment. But, till now, he had seemed disinclined for conversation. And he had hardly touched his dinner. Again and again he had walked round the kitchen, whining a little. Fancy, supposing that he wished to go outside, had opened the door, but he remained with her, staring up at her, as if he had some message to deliver. Finally, she jumped to the conclusion that the dog must be feeling unwell, or, possibly, cats lay heavy on his conscience.

"What is it, Solomon?""

He whined.

"Got a pain, Solly?"

He regarded her sorrowfully. Till that moment Fancy had been happy and light-hearted. Uncle had cheered her up. And his parting remark was uplifting and unmistakable. God had seen fit to use her, Fancy Yellam, as a humble instrument whereby Uncle's thirst for ale became less importunate. A warm glow suffused her small body.

And now, suddenly, she felt chilled, uneasy, unhappy, merely because a dog gazed mournfully at her, as if he,

the wicked little sinner, were grieving for her. Did he know that pain was coming to her inexorably? As the thought assailed her mind, so swiftly that she winced, Solomon's tail flickered. Not in joyousness. She divined that. In some uncanny fashion he was encouraging her to accept this thought of pain, to confront it valiantly, not to shrink from it.

"Do you know, Sol?" she whispered.

His tail flickered again. He leaped into her lap, and laid his head upon her bosom. She could feel his heart beating; her own heart beat with it.

Was this another amazing proof of fool-wisdom?

Peace came back to her. Humbly, she committed herself to the keeping of Omnipotence, thinking intently of her mother. Solomon never moved. She was intimately sensible that this dumb creature comforted her. She glanced into the shadows of the kitchen. Had her mother's face and figure formed themselves out of those shadows, she would not have been surprised or frightened. She expected to see her. The conviction stole slowly upon her that the mother stood near her, invisible, but a powerful protector. And from her would radiate hope and faith and love. She would be with her in her travailings. . . .

Presently, another thought stole upon her. As Mrs. Yellam said, Fancy had never seen her mother in the flesh. It seemed so cruel that she should have been taken at a moment when tiny lips were wailing for what she alone could give. From a child she had wanted her mother. To-night, for the first time, it flashed into her mind that, perhaps, her mother had wanted her—desperately. Just as she wanted her child. How bitter a disappointment it must be to forego the tender ministra-

tions, the sweet services which only women know, and which, in their fool-wisdom, they count dearer than anything the world can bestow.

If—if anything went wrong, she would join her mother. . . .

Solomon lay motionless, but his heart went on throbbing.

Why?

A last thought, the greatest, seemed to float direct from her mother's mind to hers. Alfred was facing death, daily, with a laugh, facing, too, the possibility of grinding pain. As a soldier's wife, she must try to be brave, like him. . . .

Solomon moved restlessly, and then sprang to the floor. He wagged his tail briskly, as he took up a commanding position near the door. Mrs. Yellam was approaching the cottage. If Fancy opened the door and looked out, she would not see her because it was dark. But she would not hear her, either. And if she called, Mrs. Yellam would not answer, being, as yet, too far away.

But Solomon knew.

Within five minutes, Susan Yellam entered, bringing with her an exhilarating atmosphere of keen, fresh air. Her cheeks were red; her eyes sparkled.

"Frost be coming, and maybe snow. I likes to see God A'mighty's world white and clean come Christmastide."

The old woman bustled about cheerfully, commanding Fancy to sit still. She had brought with her a fat hen-pheasant, a gift from the Squire to Alfred's wife.

"Folks are very kind," said Fancy.

"Ah, well, 'tis easy to be kind when we be happy.

Captain Pomfret walked wi' one crutch to-day. And they be drinking champagne for dinner. 'Tis the work o' that Lunnon doctor, so they say, a very wonnerful chap wi' electrics, bridlin' the lightnin', so to speak. And they perfarms miracles wi' men's faces, manufacturin' noses and what-not just so easy as pats o' butter. Such fellers must be proud o' theirselves."

"Maybe Mr. Hamlin'll return thanks in church, next Sunday."

"More'n likely. I never thought o' that."

"I wonder," said Fancy, "how it all comes to them, inventions, such as wireless and—and chloroform as takes away pain."

Mrs. Yellam chided her, very pleasantly:

"Now, don't 'ee flustrate yourself wi' thoughts o' chloryform. I allows that I can answer your question. Inventions comes to they as works hard for 'un. 'Tis hard work, and nothing else."

"Uncle would call it—fool-wisdom."

"Fool-wisdom?"

Fancy explained. Mrs. Yellam listened attentively, shaking her head from time to time. Uncle's position, to-day, would be as financially sound as her own, had he worked hard at his calling, and spent less time on crack-brained speculations and less good money on ale. She said as much, derisively. Fancy said:

"How does Solly know when you turn the corner by the mill?"

"Dog's instinct."

"Maybe 'tis the same thing."

"Fiddle!"

Fancy refrained from pressing the point, but something told her that Uncle was right, and his clever, prac-

tical sister wrong. One thing was delightfully certain. Happiness had made Mrs. Yellam kind. And it filled her with piety. She walked proudly with the Lord, carrying a high head. She had forgiven William Saint his trespasses, and expressed a trenchant conviction that Satan had removed his headquarters from Nether-Applewhite to Ocknell. And she was equally sure that Alfred would be home for Christmas, because her troubles had come in battalions at midsummer.

"Turn and turn about be only fair," she told Fancy.

Fancy said hesitatingly:

"The cards told true before, didn't they?"

"Ah-h-h! I don't pin my faith to they, child. I be weather-wise, not fool-wise. We has spells o' wet and spells o' dry. It be dry now, and likely to remain so, I reckons."

Fancy nodded, quite willing to believe that the Yellam barometer would stay, for a long spell, at "Set Fair."

After supper, when the kitchen was in perfect order, Mrs. Yellam sat knitting beside Fancy. Solomon lay at the feet of his mistress. The logs burned briskly, another evidence of coming frost. Sparks burst out of them, dazzling scintillations, miniature fireworks. Mrs. Yellam was impressed by this pyrotechnic display.

"It minds me of when Master Lionel come of age. I hopes they logs'll burn like that when Alferd is sittin' here, wi' a baby on his knee."

Mrs. Yellam appeared so satisfied with life in general that Fancy hesitated to disturb the peace, but impulse was too strong for her.

"Solly acted very queer all day."

"Did he now?"

"Hardly touched his nice dinner."

"Well, well, times he takes a notion to scrummage in dustheaps, the lil' scavenger! 'Tis the male in him, I reckons. And far-seein'. He do take a squint into the future, seemin'ly."

Fancy stared at Mrs. Yellam, slightly startled.

"He buries bones and beastliness all over my garden. I caught 'un wi' a cod's head, and cuffed his, I did."

"I took the notion that he was worrying about—about me."

"Did 'ee, now? Natural enough. You bide so ca'm as I be. Worry brings peevish children into this world. You sing a hymn, if you think it'll hearten you up. 'Onward, Christian Soldiers,' be my fav'rite."

"I do love 'Abide with Me.'"

"You sing what you've a mind to. You be near your time, and must please yourself. Singin' helped me, but it druv my pore man to the ale-house. So I quit hymns, for his sake."

"Was Mr. Yellam with you when your first baby was born?"

"My, no! What a queer lil' thing you be! He was carrier, wi' business to attend to. Men bain't wanted at such times."

"I should like to have Alfred."

"No, you wouldn't. Take that from me. I've a mind to give 'ee a sip o' currant wine."

Fancy declined this, with many thanks. The talk became desultory, and died down. Fancy dozed off quietly. Mrs. Yellam laid down her knitting and gazed keenly at the pale face bent upon the thin bosom. *Spindlin'!* Her own word came back to her. She saw that a faint smile curved the girl's lips. Evidently she was dreaming happily. Of what? Solomon rose, stretched himself, and

stood beside his mistress. He whined a little. Mrs. Yellam recalled what Fancy had said about his "acting queer."

"She bain't too strong," she muttered.

Solomon whined again and lay down.

Mrs. Yellam's face hardened. The same thought that had assailed Fancy attacked her, burying fangs in her heart.

If things went wrong——?

Resolutely, she put this thought from her. God's ways might be mysterious, but surely, surely He would stand by this frail creature, and temper the wind to her. Even to ask Him to do so seemed impertinent. Prayer came to her lips and fluttered away. She closed them tightly. All would go well, because of those four graves in the churchyard. She had visited them on the previous Sunday. They were certainly a credit to her. She washed the marble cross upon Lizzie's grave twice a year, and planted flowers on each plot. Coming out of church, strangers would pause to look at the Yellam reservation. If they read the carefully-selected inscriptions, Mrs. Yellam would feel much uplifted. In her square, brass-cornered desk, lay a sealed paper containing instructions concerning her own funeral. A plain slab would tell other strangers the date of her birth and death, her name, and her destination. "Gone Home" was to be chiselled upon grey granite, and filled in with leaded letters. Death had never dismayed her. When her work was done, she would be called.

Fancy woke up, still smiling.

"You had a nice doze, dear. Pleasant dreams, too."

"Yes," said Fancy. But she couldn't remember her dreams.

As she got out of her chair to go upstairs, she said:

"This has been a happy day, Mother. I must remember it. What is the day of the month?"

Mrs. Yellam answered promptly:

"It be the fifteenth of December. Only ten days to Christmas."

Mrs. Yellam never forgot this date. Word came to her some days later. On the fifteenth of December, a night attack was made upon German trenches, an affair of small importance, not even mentioned in the papers. When the men returned to their dug-outs, Sergeant Yellam was reported—*Missing.*

CHAPTER XVIII

MISSING!

EVERYBODY assured Mrs. Yellam that Alfred had been taken prisoner. Uncle was doubtful whether any nephew of his could be taken prisoner, but he did not say this before his sister. The Squire, good fellow, spent time and money over telegrams to the Colonel commanding Alfred's battalion. And the answer confirmed popular opinion that Alfred, by now, was in Germany, where prisoners of war—so Sir Geoffrey assured Mrs. Yellam, received more humane treatment. The dead and wounded, after the night attack, had been brought in. Alfred was not amongst them. And therefore a prisoner. His Colonel, without a word from Sir Geoffrey, expressed that as his positive belief.

Fancy, very white and anxious, hugged such belief to her small bosom. She said to Mrs. Yellam:

"Alfred will come back."

Mrs. Yellam kissed her, muttering:

"Yes, yes. You be a brave lil' 'ooman."

But Susan Yellam was dissembling. Iron had entered her soul again, iron and ice. To Uncle and Solomon she admitted this.

"He be dead, Habakkuk. I knows it. They Proosians 'd never take Alferd alive. He be dead, and so be I."

Poor Uncle fell back upon fool-wisdom.

"Now, Susan, in these high matters, the truth be re-

vealed to simple minds, like Fancy's. Me and you, dear, be too clever. I've often thought that gert brains, like yours, be a crool burden in such times as these. You be too far-seein'. Fancy be wise as a bird. If she sticks to it as Alferd be comin' back, come back he will, whatever you thinks."

But Mrs. Yellam refused to be comforted.

Next Sunday her pew was empty. Many charitably assigned this to Fancy's condition. Hamlin and Uncle knew better. And they took counsel together.

"Can anything be said or done, Uncle?" asked the Parson.

Uncle answered wisely:

"She be past man's help, sir. Me and you has seen this a-comin' from afar. The pore soul can guide herself so well as any 'ooman I knows, but she do hate to be guided. Allers, she walked wi' the Lard in health, but not in sickness. 'Tis wondersome, but it works t'other way about wi' me. In health I seems to wander from the Lard, do what I will."

"I tried once before—and failed."

"Ah-h-h! You be a faithful shepherd, Mr. Hamlin; we all knows that. If you ask my advice, sir——"

"I do. I do."

"Leave her in the Lard's Hands. None can deny that she be a faithful servant o' His. He'll take pity on the pore dear in His good time."

Hamlin seldom asked for advice from his fellow-men. He nodded his head, shook Uncle's horny hand, and went back to his study.

The great sacrifice demanded of him had strained his faith. Nobody would ever know that. For a few hours he had sat alone, stunned by sorrow. He told himself

fiercely that he could have spared any one of his sons except Teddy. The worldly ambitions which this man had renounced for himself bloomed more vigorously for Teddy. He had all the qualities which carry a young man far on any road: robust health, excellent brains, untiring energy, and a kind heart. His jolly laugh, as Hamlin knew, had secured him advancement, quite apart from his ability. Others had ability. The happy combination of laughter and energy had fetched four hundred a year in the open market. And Hamlin knew, none better, what such men are worth to the world, what a stimulus a cheery word and smile may be to the weary and sad. Why had Teddy been taken?

Ultimately, he answered that question.

He must be wanted elsewhere. Hamlin held definite opinions about a future life. He believed that death involved little change. He believed, further, that the conflict between good and evil went on upon the Other Side, that souls expanded or diminished over there just as here. Upon that belief he had built up his philosophy of life. It explained and justified apparent injustices and inequalities very perplexing to him as a young man. He believed, also, that good or evil inspired all human endeavour. The clay was informed by the spirit. Great writers, influencing millions, were merely the mouthpiece, the megaphone, of invisible spirits, guardian angels, to use the homely nursery expression, who whispered their message to the vessel appointed to receive it. Nobody, for many years, had heard him praise enthusiastically an individual. He praised the work that each had been inspired to do. In Nether-Applewhite, there happened to be a village idiot, whose great lolling head and vacuous eyes excited terror in children and

often revulsion in adults. And the man was past middle age, helpless and gibbering from birth. Hamlin never passed him without reflecting that death would release an imprisoned soul destined, perhaps, to an undreamed-of development hereafter, the greater because it had been denied expression on earth. And, inversely, when he met, as he did occasionally, men pre-eminent in science, or art, or industry, he seemed to see clearly the man standing sharply apart from his work, often a very ordinary person, undistinguished save for the amazing fact that he had been selected, out of millions, to accomplish something vital to the progress of the world.

He had found Authority for this personal belief in the New Testament.

Hamlin sat still by his fire and thought of Mrs. Yellam. He desired to help her with an intensity which few would have suspected. Her empty pew, as before, stood out in his mind as a vacuum which he abhorred. Not because he was a parson. Churchgoing, in one sense, the sense in which William Saint regarded it, touched his humour. To go to church because it was respectable and pleased the Squire, to mumble prayers, to preserve a smug deportment, and rattle coins into an offertory plate, approximated closely to comic opera! Mrs. Yellam attended church to worship her Maker. Her abstention from Divine Service indicated loss of faith, the most grievous loss that can be imposed upon human beings. Faith filled Mrs. Yellam's pew; faithlessness emptied it. And if she, the strong woman, the helper in so many good works, stayed away from God's House, what would be the effect on the faith of others who looked up to her as a pattern and example?

His fighting instincts were strongly stirred. But Uncle

was right. For the moment, Susan Yellam stood alone, beyond man's help.

He went to see her as a friend. As before, she received him with perfect self-possession, answered his questions quietly, and assured him that her own health caused her no anxiety. Hamlin thought of a chapel standing by itself upon a high hill near Abbotsbury, in perfect condition without, stripped within, an empty and deserted temple. Presently Fancy came in, and Mrs. Yellam went out. After the first greeting, Fancy exclaimed eagerly:

"I know that Alfred will come back. I feel it here."

She touched her bosom.

He perceived, with poignant regret, the ravages wrought by suspense. But this, he soon discovered, was not due to apprehension concerning herself. She was worrying because Alfred would not get enough to eat. She talked confidently of his escape from bondage. Alfred was a man of resource, quick to seize opportunity. Dozens had gŏt through to Holland. Why not he?

Then she spoke of the war. What did it all mean, this never-ending slaughter? Was God angry with the world?

Hamlin felt more at ease with this softer specimen of womanhood, who had served him faithfully. He admitted frankly, despite the evidence of the Old Testament, that he could not conceive of Omnipotence as "angry." Then he appealed to her imagination, evoking out of his own hopes and hypotheses a new world of nations, linked together by a nobler and wider humanity, poorer in material things, richer in faith and charity. He sketched for her prehistoric man concerned only with self-preservation. He passed from this ape-man to his successor informed by love of his own family. From

him again to the chief concerned with the welfare of his tribe. And thence to the monarch and his nation.

"We must come, sooner or later, to Universal Brotherhood. That, I think, Fancy, may come sooner because of this war. The gain to those who are not yet born may be ten thousand times greater than our loss."

Her pale cheeks flushed.

"I'd like to think that." She paused, adding modestly: "Although my thoughts don't matter."

"But they do," he hastened to say. "This war is forcing people to think, who have never thought before. Perhaps we preachers and teachers have been unwise in asking others to accept our thoughts, instead of encouraging them to think for themselves. Don't be afraid of thinking things out. And when it comes to matters of religion, of faith . . ."

He paused, trying to find simple words, struck by the intensity of her glance, knowing that what he might say would be pondered over by a quick intelligence.

"Yes, sir——?"

"There would seem to be two kinds of faith, Fancy; the faith that falls like the dew from heaven upon some little children, a free gift from God; and the faith which we have to work for, and suffer for, and fight for with every fibre of our being. I have had to work for my faith; I have had to dig down and down till I came at last to some rock upon which I could stand. I could hardly bear the cruelty of these times, if I had not found that rock."

"What is that rock, sir?"

"A conviction that this life is only a part, a small part of a tremendous whole which our finite minds are unable to grasp. That conviction comes from experience.

It is independent of what is called revealed religion, although it has been revealed by all religions, inasmuch as it must come from within to be of any real value and comfort. It must be worked for, as I say, and paid for. The reward, when that rock is reached, is very great."

"What is it, sir?"

"The peace that passes understanding. And now, Fancy, in the trial that awaits you, trust in that first faith of which I spoke, the faith that I am sure is yours. God knows what is best for us. We all try to make Him walk in our ways, instead of walking humbly in His."

She said shyly: "Thank you, sir; you have made things easier for me."

It was late when Hamlin left the Yellam cottage and bitterly cold. He walked to Pomfret Court, and found the Squire in his room. In that room hard words had passed between Squire and Parson. To-day they were friends, working together. And the marriage of their children did not adequately account for this. It was one of the unexpected results of the war.

"Dinner in five-and-twenty minutes," said Sir Geoffrey. I'm delighted to see you, my dear fellow."

"I wish I could stop. I need your help."

The Squire rang the bell. When the butler came, dinner was postponed a quarter of an hour. Another straw to indicate a change in domestic currents. Before the war, dinner at Pomfret Court had been regarded as a sacred function, never postponed merely because the Parson wanted a word with the Squire.

"I want you to pull more strings," said Hamlin, after telling his story at some length. "You know swells at the Foreign Office. It must be possible to find out through some kind neutral at The Hague whether a

prisoner of the name of Alfred Yellam was taken upon the night of the fifteenth. Very few prisoners have been taken lately; that would make the enquiry comparatively simple."

"I'll draw that cover to-morrow morning."

Hamlin thanked him and hurried away. The Squire was amazing. To travel to London in this bitter weather meant the sacrifice of what the genial Autocrat ranked high—comfort. He would go, like a terrier to a fox, straight to a Mandarin and bark at him, worry him, stick to him, till a pledge was extracted.

He thought of the trains congested by Christmas travel, the lack of porters and taxis. Obviously, the Squire recked nothing of this in his hot desire to do a kind turn to a humble neighbour.

Hamlin reflected that Christmas would be the cosier to the Autocrat after a cold excursion. He remembered hearing him say that he never appreciated his own fireside so much as after a bad day's hunting, when the wind blew chill from the north and hounds wouldn't run a yard.

Thoughts of hunting distracted the Parson as he strode back to his lonely Vicarage. What a master passion it was in everybody! The Squire hunted foxes in all weathers, regardless of weather conditions. Nothing stopped him but a hard frost. His Parson hunted men and women, a more arduous chase, hounding them out of covers where dirt, ignorance, poverty and vice hid them from view. A hard frost, such as had settled on Susan Yellam, stopped him. Others hunted fame, money, position, just as ardently. And a hard frost, like this war, stopped them.

When would the thaw set in for Mrs. Yellam?

Upon Christmas Eve Fancy's ordeal began.

Hamlin hoped and believed that tiny hands would melt the ice in an old woman's heart. Everybody knew that Susan Yellam loved children, and that her rather grim face inspired no terrors in them. She kept the large green bottle full of bull's-eyes, simply because it lured pattering feet to her door. If they trotted up too often, rebukes, not bull's-eyes, were forthcoming. A sure way to her favour, as little girls soon discovered, was to ask for a flower out of the garden. Farseeing women, overbusy on washing-days, popped torn pinafores onto their toddlers, knowing that Mrs. Yellam would be sure to take her needle and repair the damage. She could always be called upon to sit up with a sick child, provided—*bien entendu*—that she was permitted to administer her own simple medicines. Grateful mothers, with an eye upon further favours, would say to Mrs. Yellam in the presence of neighbours:

"Susan Yellam saved my Daisy's life."

And then Mrs. Yellam would nod majestically, accepting such artful homage as her just due.

To Mrs. Yellam's great relief, Fancy suffered less than she had feared and expected. Nature was kind to this soft-boned little woman, and chloroform assuaged the fiercer pangs. But the baby seemed loath to enter so cold a world. There were long and exasperating intermittencies, which Fancy endured very patiently. Throughout these periods, when Fancy wished to talk about Alfred, Mrs. Yellam dissembled. She even went so far, in her eagerness to please and distract the patient, that she accepted the sex of the tardy infant, speaking of it as "him," to Fancy's great gratification.

Finally, "He" was born at two o'clock upon Christmas Day.

And, alack! the cards had not told true. *He* was a *She.*

Fancy did not know this for some time. Too exhausted to ask questions, she lay silent and still, a faint smile upon her white face, till she dozed off into a dreamless sleep.

In the parlour downstairs, where a fire had been lighted in the doctor's honour, Mrs. Yellam received another blow. There had been no complications in the case; the baby was perfectly formed and normal in every way. Nevertheless, the doctor looked worried and refused such refreshment as had been provided. Obviously, too, he was in a hurry to be gone, but he lingered.

"She is very weak," he said, in a low, impressive voice.

"That's natural."

"Keep her as quiet as possible. I shall return about ten. The nurse has my instructions. Great lack of vitality is indicated. Needless to say, there is no question of her nursing the child. You are a strong, sensible woman, Mrs. Yellam, and able to hide any anxiety you may feel from the patient."

The poor heart, just beginning to thaw, felt an icy hand closing about it.

"I know how to behave," she muttered.

"I must prepare you for a possible change—not for the better."

"Yes."

She spoke so calmly, that the doctor glanced at her keenly. Was she indifferent? It might be so. Relations, as he well knew, were often strained between elderly women of strong character and their sons' wives.

He knew that Alfred had been reported missing. The monthly nurse might be regarded as a professional, like himself, willing and able to do her duty. More than this might be required. He reflected swiftly that he must make the situation even plainer to this somewhat hard-faced, hard-eyed woman.

"She might sink from anæmia, Mrs. Yellam."

"I understand, sir."

He slipped on his heavy coat, picked up hat and gloves and turned to leave the room. His motor was gently purring outside. Mrs. Yellam prided herself upon her manners. But she never moved to open the door, till the doctor had his hand upon it.

"Sir——?"

"Yes?"

She approached him. Her face remained calm, but he saw that her strong, capable hands were twitching. Her voice, too, quavered a little.

"She be very dear to me, so dear that I be ready to fight for her life harder than I would for my own. That's all."

The doctor, ashamed of too hasty conclusions, took both her hands in his.

"That is much," he said gravely; "and it may make all the difference. Good-night, Mrs. Yellam."

"Good-morning, sir," she admonished him.

Left alone, she sat down, palsied by despair.

And this was Christmas Day!

Upon the table, near the window, the big Bible caught her eye. She stared at it, thinking of the page upon which, soon, she might be called upon to make three entries—two deaths and one birth. Heavy antimacassars embellished the horsehair-covered sofa and the arm-

chairs. Mrs. Yellam rose up, snatched three antimacassars from their abiding-place and covered the Bible with them. Then she sat down again, looking about her, glaring at the familiar objects, so eloquent of the past. Upon each side of a large mirror, with its gilt frame protected by muslin from flies that had never dared to enter the room, hung two enlarged photographs of herself and her husband, taken some five-and-twenty years ago. They seemed to stare unblushingly and aggressively at her, as if they were rude strangers overbrimming with self-importance, smug with prosperity.

"Fools," said Mrs. Yellam, scornfully.

She looked at the other photographs, each in turn, portraits of the children who lay in the churchyard.

"You be the lucky ones," she said, in the same derisive tone.

There were many photographs of Alfred in all stages of development: Alfred sucking his thumb with an expression upon his year-old countenance as if he were thinking regretfully of something more nourishing; Alfred in a much be-ribanded frock; Alfred in knickerbockers; Alfred in a kilt; Alfred in trowsers, evidently on good terms with himself and all the world; Alfred as he appeared in his Sunday best, about to take the air with an audacious parlourmaid; and, lastly, Alfred in khaki and Fancy, arm in crook.

She glanced hastily at other photographs, of Sir Geoffrey and Lady Pomfret and Master Lionel. They smiled so pleasantly that she frowned. How dared they smile?

She was not needed yet upstairs. So she sat on in the gate of her sorrows, alone in the valley of Achor.

She heard Solomon scratching at the door. She had left him asleep in his basket, always placed each night by

the kitchen hearth. Mrs. Yellam let the dog scratch, but when he began whining she let him in, because Fancy might be disturbed, not because she wanted her dog.

Solomon looked at her, and knew.

He governed himself accordingly. Mrs. Yellam had returned to her chair. Solomon lay down at her feet. When she wanted to talk to him, she would do so. He kept one ear cocked for the first word.

During twenty minutes no word was said. The nurse was in charge of Fancy and the baby. Mrs. Yellam had looked forward to assisting at these first rites. The expected pleasure had turned into a grinding pain.

Fancy was going, drifting out of life. Probably her baby would not survive her many days. But she, the old woman, would remain. She gazed down the long perspective of the years to come, cold, dull days without one gleam of sunshine, full of inevitable pain.

"I can't bear it," she said aloud. "It be too much for me."

Solomon heard. He knew, of course, that the long-awaited words were not addressed to him, but they sounded a clarion note of distress.

He laid his head against her knee.

She looked at him, meeting his clear young eyes. They seemed to be full of interrogation.

"If you want to talk, why not talk to me instead of to yourself?"

She patted his head, and let her hand rest upon it. According to Uncle, fool-wisdom in dogs warned them of impending disaster. Mrs. Yellam knew that Solomon had behaved strangely upon the fifteenth of December. Uncle had drawn conclusions from this which he shared with Fancy and his sister. If fool-wisdom on the part

of dogs could be interpreted by man, and he held that he was the man to do it, why, then, the fact of Solomon acting "queer" during the day of the fifteenth surely indicated fore-knowledge of Alfred's danger. But the attack had taken place at night. And the dog had exhibited no "queerness" after sundown. Fancy had been much impressed. In his heart, however, Uncle could not envisage Alfred as a prisoner. And we know that Mrs. Yellam shared this view. At the same time, with her loss of faith in the mercy of Omnipotence, and filling the vacuum which Hamlin so abhorred, came the old craving to clutch at "signs." It is quite likely that if the cards had "told true," and if a boy were now lying in the cradle upstairs, that Mrs. Yellam would have fought despair more valiantly. She might have persuaded herself that Fancy would "pull through" and that Alfred would come back.

At this moment she was at a low ebb mentally, although physically able to confront any emergency. Despair destroys *morale,* as soldiers know, and, paralysing action, heightens sensation. Mrs. Yellam's overwrought brain refused to function normally.

Solomon, she reflected, was not acting "queer."

If Uncle were right——! If fool-wisdom could be trusted——!

She asked Solomon a question.

"How be you feeling, my dog?"

Solomon left her tired mind in no doubt on that point. He wagged his tail, wriggling convulsively, ready to bark with any encouragement.

"Shush-h-h! Don't 'ee bark, till I gives leave. What do 'ee think about Fancy? Be she so bad as Doctor makes out?"

Solomon tried to lick her hand.

"That bain't an answer, Solly."

He wagged his tail.

Astounding as it may seem, this comforted Mrs. Yellam. She went upstairs, peeped into her former room, perceived that Fancy was asleep, and said to the nurse:

"She be in a be-utiful sleep. Let's see the baby."

The two women looked at the baby, and agreed that it was a fine specimen. Mrs. Yellam said impressively:

"Pore dear soul! She thinks it a He. Maybe 'twill be best not to undeceive her."

"She'll find out, Mrs. Yellam."

"Ah-h-h! A crool shock. I allows that it be my duty to prepare her."

"She's low," said the nurse, in a professional tone. Mrs. Yellam knew that the doctor, before leaving, had given the nurse instructions. The nurse, however, made light of apprehension, saying incisively:

"We'll pull her through, Mrs. Yellam. Nothing needed but constant care for the first few days. Doctors always scare the gizzards out of us because they think that we won't be careful unless they do."

This was comforting. After more talk, Mrs. Yellam prevailed upon the nurse to lie down. She proposed to sit by Fancy. The baby could be trusted to be quiet, being a She, and, seemingly, blessed with a pleasant temper.

Fancy still slept.

Mrs. Yellam took the chair by the bedside. If nothing but care and vigilance were needed, they should be forthcoming. She vowed to herself that she would fight, tooth and nail, for this life, neglect no precaution, run no risk. Physically, she braced herself for the combat.

Long ago, she had fought for the life of a child—and won! Doctor and mother had despaired. It was a case of pneumonia. Hour after hour Mrs. Yellam had applied hot cloths to the child's breast. And she had willed fiercely that the child should live. Her strong will *had* saved it. Everybody admitted that, even the doctor.

Fancy slept for some hours. She awoke refreshed, free from pain, but pitifully feeble. After obediently swallowing some food, she asked to see the "boy."

"All in good time," said Mrs. Yellam blandly.

"But I may drop off to sleep again."

"And a very good thing, too. The baby is asleep."

"Has he blue eyes?"

"Baby's eyes be allers blue at first."

"Is he like Alfred?"

"The living image. Now, don't 'ee talk."

"If you bring him to me, I'll be ever so quiet."

"I'll bring the child directly minute. 'Tis a lil' beauty, and a real credit to 'ee. Alferd'll be tickled to death. Unbeknownst to yourself, dear, you bore him what he wanted, and what I wanted. Now, I'll bring her in."

"Her——!"

Fancy closed her eyes. Mrs. Yellam watched her anxiously. She saw two tears trickle down the disappointed mother's cheeks. But she was smiling, quick to see the joke against herself.

She gave a little laugh, an attenuated sound, but the genuine article.

"Let's see her, Mother."

The Beauty was brought in.

CHAPTER XIX

SUSPENSE

SIR GEOFFREY returned home on Saturday, the 23rd, having achieved his purpose. From The Hague, within twenty-four hours, discreet enquiries would be made concerning Sergeant Yellam. But the answer might be delayed a week.

On Sunday and on Christmas Day Mrs. Yellam's pew was empty, but everybody knew that she was in attendance upon Fancy.

Hamlin preached what Uncle called a "very upliftin'" discourse, and Uncle made it his business to drop down to the Yellam cottage during the afternoon to learn how Fancy fared and to give his sister a synopsis of the morning's sermon. By the luck of things, the nurse had just got up, and was able to sit with Fancy, whilst Uncle talked with Susan in the kitchen.

"She be low, Habakkuk, but I be fighting for her. Oh, me! there's so little of her. And no milk for the baby."

"Lard preserve her dear life!"

Susan frowned.

"'Tis milk that be wanted.

"You be right. Bottle-babies suffer crool wi' colic."

"Not if I wash the bottles. Fancy have chosen the names."

"Ah-h-h! Susan be one of 'em; I'll lay a crown-piece on that."

"You'd lose your money. Lizzie Alfreda be the name."

Uncle considered this, and commended the choice. Then he squared his shoulders and inflated his big chest.

"You missed a rare treat this marning, Susan."

"Did I?"

She spoke with indifference. Uncle believed in "gentling" refractory horses and women. Conviction had descended upon him during the sermon that he might be the Lord's instrument to lead Susan Yellam back to her pew.

"Pa'son preached about the Babe of Bethlehem, as was right and proper, but I makes bold to say as he was thinking of 'ee, Susan, and of Lizzie Alfreda, bless 'un."

Mrs. Yellam felt strangely bored. But she knew that it was hopeless to try to stop Uncle. What did it matter what any parson said? She was wondering whether she could apply for milk to Mr. Fishpingle, at the Home Farm. Village cows, grazing by the roadside, might pick up any noxious weed.

Uncle continued solemnly:

"Me and Pa'son sees eye to eye about babes. And times, when he do drop out o' sky and walks the green earth with mortial men, I feel sure that fool-wisdom be his as 'tis mine. We sucked 'un in wi' mother's milk."

Susan said abruptly:

"I've a notion, Habakkuk, that the milk from they Freesian-Holsteen cows bain't too rich for a baby's stomach."

Uncle stared at her, anxiously. With difficulty, he assimilated her thoughts, abandoning, for the moment, his own.

"Quantity they gives, Susan, not quality. If I was lookin' after lil' Lizzie Alfreda, dang me, if I wouldn't give 'un pure cream."

"I'll be bound you would. Or old ale."

She smiled grimly. Uncle really thought that the thaw had set in. He continued joyously:

"You listen to me, Susan; I've an upliftin' message for 'ee, and it consarns what your thoughts be dwellin' on—the baby upstairs. Pa'son made that plain this marning to us old sticks. The Babe of Bethlehem brought good cheer and peace to a wicked world ten thousand years ago, and the peace o' this world, seemin'ly, lies wi' the little 'uns. And we be bound to take extry good care o' they. I tell 'ee, Pa'son talked so warm about babes that I felt it in me to raise another family."

"On pure cream?" asked Susan. But, at last, he had challenged her attention.

"Ah-h-h! You has your joke. But babes be goin' to be our salvation. 'Tis a brave, true notion. What makes a pack o' hounds, Susan? The young drafts. If they be lackin' in bone and blood, they turns out skirters, and presently the pack be streamin' all over country, runnin' riot, chasin' everything and catchin' nothing. And so, old girl, when you sets your gert mind on what milk to give lil' Lizzie, you be sarvin' the Lard and your country."

Encouraged by Susan's softer expression, Uncle went on, embroidering his theme with pardonable exaggeration, setting forth prodigious statistics. Millions of babes died for lack of proper care, millions survived infancy to become rickety, misformed, wretched children. And the war was going to change all this. A nation bled white of its men must make the care of children its first and

paramount consideration. When he had finished, Susan was so impressed that she said commandingly:

"'Tis true. And your duty be plain, Habakkuk."

"Meanin', Susan,——?"

"You step up so brisk as may be to Home Farm. You see Mr. Fishpingle. You tell 'un that my gran'child needs pure milk, and, if you don't get it, your powers o' speech bain't what you crack 'em up to be."

"Come wi' me, Susan. 'Twill blow some cobwebs out of 'ee."

"No; I sets in this house till——"

"Till when, you broody old hen?"

"Till Fancy be better."

After some protest, Uncle went his way alone, but he whistled as he strode along, the jolly optimist. Next Sunday he would see Susan in her pew. Soon there would be a christening, and word would come from Alfred. Uncle now shared with the Squire the conviction that Alfred, probably rushing ahead of his men, had been surrounded by Proosians and overpowered.

Upon the Tuesday, the Squire received a telegram from London, which he shewed to his wife:

"Yellam not a prisoner."

The telegram was signed by one of the most honoured names in England.

Lady Pomfret sighed. The Squire fussed and fumed, detesting mystery.

"What does it mean, Mary? If he isn't a prisoner, where the dooce is he? I have his Colonel's word for it that all the dead and wounded were brought in. This telegram is equally reliable. I ask you, where is Alfred Yellam?"

"Shell-shock affects some of them very strangely."

"What d'ye mean by that, my dear?"

"You remember John Boyce?"

The Squire was not likely to forget John Boyce, one of the quietest, gentlest, and pluckiest of the many wounded men who had passed through Pomfret Court. He had been a sufferer from shell-shock and gas, but otherwise sound of limb. One morning, as the Squire was lathering his face, word came to him that John Boyce had gone mad. Without pausing to remove the lather, wearing pyjamas and slippers, the Squire had rushed out of his dressing-room, downstairs, and into a corridor, where Boyce stood at bay, with a valiant V. A. D. in front of him. He had escaped from the ward, and happened to be close to Lionel's sitting-room. Into this room the Squire led Boyce, trying to calm him down. The poor fellow was possessed of suicidal mania. He had lost his chums and his health. He demanded a rifle and permission to go into the garden and "end it." It was piteous to hear him. As yet he had exhibited no violence. But in Lionel's room, where swords were hanging on the wall, Boyce, with his congested eyes on the naked steel, struggled desperately to get hold of a sword. The Squire was a very powerful man, and Boyce undersized, but insanity nearly mastered sanity. Suddenly, Boyce's body relaxed. All violence went out of him. Soon he went back to the saloon, quite himself again. Later, he was taken to Netley Hospital, where he recovered completely.

Lady Pomfret said slowly:

"Just between ourselves, Geoffrey, is it possible that poor Alfred, slightly wounded in the head, perhaps, is wandering somewhere in France?"

The Squire opened his mouth.

"My dear Mary, are you hinting at—desertion?"

"If he were not himself, like John Boyce?"

The Squire had to admit that this was possible. Alfred must be somewhere. Upon him would be his identification-disk. The number of this had been sent to The Hague.

"I must see Hamlin."

He did. Hamlin told him that Fancy was fluttering between life and death. Under the circumstances, it might be expedient to say nothing about the telegram. To this the Squire warmly agreed. Nobody knew what was in the telgram, except Lady Pomfret and themselves. Nobody would know till Fancy had turned the corner, one way or t'other, poor little dear!

Within twenty-four hours all Nether-Applewhite knew.

Somebody at the telegraph-office must have babbled.

What followed may be imagined. Dick told Tom, and Tom told Harry, till verisimilitude—to quote Gilbert—attached itself to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative. Ultimately, the tale reached the ears of Uncle. Alfred Yellam was a deserter—such a deduction from the telegram might be considered crude, but on that very account likely to be gobbled by gaffers—with a price set upon him, alive or dead. King Garge on his throne knew it.

Poor Uncle became distraught. If it were true, he could never carry a high head again. Stoutly he refused to believe it, breathing strange oaths and threatening violence to all and sundry. If such a wicked lie reached Fancy's ears, it would kill her. He strode into the forest to cool himself. Could he face his fellow-men in church? He beheld two empty pews, and gnashed his teeth.

Returning from the forest, somewhat easier in mind, he decided that Susan must be warned. Very wisely he went to Hamlin first, who confirmed the telegram, agreeing with Uncle that Mrs. Yellam should be told the truth and what it had been twisted into by wagging tongues. Sensible of Uncle's excitement and indignation, he said quietly:

"You must rise above this gossip. It is not unnatural and not ill-natured."

"I begs your pardon, sir?"

"Sir Geoffrey says that Alfred must be somewhere. For my part, I prefer to think of him in the care, perhaps, of some friendly French peasant, tending a man who may not remember his own name."

"That be a mort o' comfort. Twice in my long life, I minds forgetting my own name. I took a notion that I were the village idiot. Bad ale's tricksy stuff. But desartion be a tarr'ble word."

Hamlin clapped him hard on the shoulder.

"Nobody who knows Alfred, or his mother, or you, would credit such a monstrous perversion of the truth."

Uncle, much heartened, betook himself to his sister's cottage, where the surprise of his life awaited him. Susan literally jumped at this new hypothesis. She burst into excited speech.

"If Squire thinks that, 'tis so. Parson be a wonnerful man, but, as you says, Habakkuk, sky-high above we. Squire be clay, a gert human bein' wise wi' the wisdom that I understands. If he holds that my Alferd be wanderin', pore dear, in France, 'tis so. I feels a different 'ooman to-night. And Fancy be better, too, wi' some sart o' appetite for her victuals. I be fightin' hard for her life, Habakkuk, and I believes to-night that all will

be well. 'Tis queer, Fancy keeps on a-sayin' to me: 'Alferd'll come back.' "

"Maybe he will, maybe he won't. Pa'son be prayin' in church for Alferd. 'Twould seem more respectful-like if you jined in wi' your loud voice."

At once Mrs. Yellam's face hardened.

"I bide at home till Alferd comes back."

"Ah-h-h! You be set as never was on guidin' yourself, Susan. Now, what about tellin' Fancy?"

"I tells her the moment you be gone. 'Twill perk her up, better'n ginger-brandy. And what do I keer what they says in village? Let 'un talk. Squire be right. Alferd must be somewheres."

Fancy was told within the hour. It will never be known whether the news affected her for good or ill. Mrs. Yellam lacked imagination. Fancy, we may believe, conjured up a lamentable picture of her Alfred, bereft of his wits, wandering in a strange land, homeless and half-starving, at the mercy of the elements in mid-winter. But she repeated the main clause in her creed:

"Alfred'll come back."

Napoleon has assured us that repetition is the greatest figure of rhetoric. The stone is worn away by the ever-falling drop of water. Fancy's reiterated phrase fell persistently upon the ice in Susan Yellam's heart and melted some of it, not all.

Upon the Thursday morning the Squire received a letter from the Colonel commanding Sergeant Yellam's battalion. He read it to Lady Pomfret.

"My dear Sir:

"With deep regret I have to inform you of the death of Sergeant Alfred Yellam upon the night of the fifteenth

of December. All the facts have come to light, beyond dispute. One of our wounded men has been lying unconscious in our receiving hospital. Last night he became conscious. It seems that Yellam was close to him when a shell from a trench howitzer burst literally upon poor Yellam. According to the evidence of the wounded man Yellam disappeared. That was the last indelible impression of the only witness, who was struck by a splinter from the same shell, and lost consciousness immediately afterwards.

"Sergeant Yellam had earned the affection and confidence of all ranks. He was the type of man we value most, cool in danger, modest at all times, cheerful, energetic and capable. Peace be with him!

"Yours faithfully,

"Courtenay Tring.

"P. S.—The official communication will reach Sergeant Yellam's widow in due course. This letter will precede it, and I leave it to your discretion what to do."

"What shall we do?" groaned the Squire.

Before telling the news to anybody else, Sir Geoffrey walked to the Vicarage. Hamlin read the letter.

"Susan Yellam must be told," he said slowly. "She can intercept the official communication. Such news would kill Fancy."

"Who will tell Susan?"

"I will take the letter to her."

The Squire looked at his face. He wondered why Hamlin was so affected. The Parson had sat down, as if he had received a personal blow. He rested his austere face upon his hand, thinking not of the young wife,

so full of faith and courage, but of the old woman. Sir Geoffrey said impulsively:

"I wish that you could be spared this, Hamlin."

"So do I."

"You might let Jane Mucklow do it, or Uncle."

"Susan Yellam is my parishioner. God's hand lies heavy on her—how heavy I am unable to determine. I have never felt, Pomfret, so conscious of my disabilities, of anæmic faith in such cases as this."

The Squire stood confounded.

"I wish I had your faith, Hamlin."

"What is faith?" asked Hamlin, almost fiercely. "Is it merely a belief that satisfies and helps oneself? The faith that burned in the Apostles was more than that. It saved others. Virtue, at a touch, went out of the faithful into the faithless. If I could touch this poor old woman——!"

"You will," said the Squire, with assurance.

"No. And that is why I wish that I could be spared another—failure."

Soon afterwards he left the Vicarage, and, passing the church, paused a moment. He went in and stood near the Font, staring at the Christmas decorations and then at the Pomfret achievements emblazoned upon many of the windows. The decorations served to remind the smallest child in his congregation that another Child had been born into the world; the achievements reminded the more sophisticated of the Pomfrets who had died. The Child had been born to save others; the Pomfrets, many of them worthy, God-fearing persons, had been mainly concerned in preserving their own bodies and souls.

"He saved others; Himself He cannot save."

The wonderful line came into his mind, as his thoughts dwelt upon the millions of seemingly righteous, respectable men and women bent on saving their own souls, with but little regard for the souls of others. The Salvation Army, so derided and condemned by Church and State when he was a boy, had accomplished work which could not be ignored by priest and prelate, work undertaken by labourers with no outshining qualifications except faith in their ability to convince others, others as humble in condition as themselves, who stood, for the most part, beyond the pale of organised charity and richly-endowed religious denominations.

Did this war, in relation to such thoughts, assume a new significance? Could regeneration, reconstruction come from below, from the masses, for example, out of which General Booth had enlisted his soldiers? Would a privilege, the noblest in the world, the sacrosanct prerogative to touch others to finer issues, emanate from the unprivileged? Hamlin could not answer the question. Or, as seemed more likely, would light shine from above, from a purified aristocracy, purged of self-interest by sacrifice, proud and eager to remove intolerable burdens from their less fortunate fellow-men? Or, a happier hypothesis than either, would the complex problem be solved by co-operation of masses and classes made one by sorrow and suffering, born anew through blood and tears? It might well be so.

He left the church, and walked through the village. Much rain had fallen. He noticed that the Avon was swollen, and ready to overflow its banks. The wind blew cold upon his cheeks. The sun moved behind heavy clouds ready to discharge vast accumulations of moisture.

In short, a raw, drizzling day, one of the last of an unhappy year.

When Hamlin reached the cottage, a small girl, who came in during the morning to do house-work, the scrubbing and cleaning so dear to Susan, told the Parson that Mrs. Yellam was upstairs. She believed that Mrs. Alfred had passed a nice night. The baby was doing "lovely."

Susan appeared within a minute. A glance at Hamlin's face was enough for her. In silence he took her hand and pressed it.

"You has news of Alferd, sir?"

Her voice was perfectly calm, calmer than his.

"I have a letter from his Commanding Officer. Sit down, and read it."

They were alone in the parlour. The antimacassars had been taken from the big Bible and replaced. But no fire burned in the grate. To Hamlin the room stood for all that he detested and assailed in English life and character. In its humble way, it positively exuded pretension. The carpet, a crudely-coloured body Brussels, the ornaments on the mantel-shelf, the enlarged photographs, the horse-hair and mahogany furniture, the prim bookcase, glazed and glaringly varnished, imprisoning, under lock and key, books that nobody read or could read, the mirror, the velveteen curtains with imitation lace undercurtains, all had been bought to impress neighbours! It was pathetic to reflect that Mrs. Yellam thought this hideous parlour a thing of beauty, whereas her kitchen, a joy to behold, was merely regarded as utilitarian. And yet the kitchen expressed sincerely all that was finest in Mrs. Yellam; the parlour set forth blatantly the defects of her strong personality.

She read the letter.

"May I keep it, sir?"

"Yes. Colonel Tring tells us, Mrs. Yellam, what we all know here. Alfred was a son to be proud of."

Her face remained impassive. She agreed respectfully that it would be unwise to tell Fancy the truth till some measure of strength returned to her. Hamlin had thought out a score of simple sentences. He said none of them. In all his long life he had never realised so acutely the illimitable space which may divide two human beings. At this moment Parson and Parishioner stood far apart as the poles. He had intended to allude to his own son. But she might fling in his teeth the cutting reminder that he had others and a daughter. And in this cold, ugly room, looking upon her frozen face, sympathy congealed at its source. He withheld condolence, because it must hurt instead of help. In silence he commended her soul to God, and went away.

Mrs. Yellam unlocked her brass-cornered desk, and placed the letter amongst other papers. Then, idly, she looked out of the window, which faced the road and river. Before Hamlin came, she had stood at the window upstairs, staring out upon the same familiar landscape. And she had asked for a sign. She had looked at the heavy clouds even as Fancy had looked at her cards. If light shone through them, she might believe that for her spring and summer would bloom again.

The sign had not been vouchsafed.

Now, she stood at the window again, with features slightly relaxed. Such an expression informed her face as may be seen, sometimes, on the faces of steerage passengers upon trans-Atlantic boats taking leave for ever of their native land.

She turned from the window and went, heavily, into the kitchen.

Had she waited a minute longer, she would have seen a sign. Through the falling rain shone a strange light, palely amber. It illuminated the dull water-meadows, evoking colour—iridescent, opaline tints—where colour had ceased to be. It transmuted, magically, the sombre lead of the swollen river into sparkling gold. And then, swiftly, the light failed, the vision splendid vanished like a mirage, leaving behind a desert.

She went up stairs. Fancy said eagerly:

"What does Mr. Hamlin say, Mother?"

Mrs. Yellam hesitated, for one second only. She was unprepared for this question; she had forgotten the small maid who had scuttled into the room, saying that the Parson wanted to see Mrs. Yellam. With a tremendous effort she lied superbly, this woman who loathed lies because, in her masculine wisdom, she knew that lies made all ordinary matters worse instead of better.

She held up her finger.

"You be much too curious, my girl. Mr. Hamlin dropped in, very friendly-like, to ask me about the baby's christening. He be a oner for gettin' the lambs into the fold so quick as may be."

Fancy was quite satisfied.

"I told 'un," continued Mrs. Yellam placidly, embroidering her theme after a fashion which surely would have provoked envy and commendation from Uncle, "that you'd be up and about in no time. We passed a few cheerful remarks about this be-utiful weather, and then off he goes."

"I'd like to wait for Alfred," murmured Fancy. "I've a notion that he'll come before the New Year. If he

ain't a prisoner, he will come. I wonder if he knows how bad I want him."

"Ah-h-h!" She paused, and then added sharply: "If wanting 'd bring Alferd, he'd be here now. You eat more and think less, and then we'll all be happy."

With that Mrs. Yellam went abruptly out of the room.

CHAPTER XX

THE TRAVELLER RETURNS

THROUGHOUT the day, Mrs. Yellam hovered in and out of Fancy's room, instinctively conscious that her patient was less strong, but obstinately determined to fight that instinct. Outwardly, there was no change. Fancy lay quiet, thinking and talking of Alfred. Lizzie Alfreda, happily, evoked no maternal anxiety. Colic did not disturb the infantile slumbers. She smiled ineffably at a bottle which contained Frisian-Holstein milk drawn from prize-winners, and judiciously blended with lime-water. On this mild tipple the child thrived amazingly. The monthly nurse now retired to her own cottage at night, returning in the morning. Susan Yellam slept upon a small bed made up in Fancy's room. The doctor had expressed gratification at the increasing vitality of his patient. And on the Wednesday, he said that he should not call again for three days, unless he were sent for. He congratulated Susan upon her devotion and skill with unmistakable sincerity.

In the afternoon, the morning's drizzle became a downpour, and the Avon escaped from its banks. If such rain continued, the Yellam cottage would soon become an island. Susan was not disturbed by this. Nothing mattered; nothing distracted her save the overpowering determination to put Fancy on her feet again. Fancy would assume control of her child. And then an old

woman would sit down, fold her hands, and await the end. Her premature conviction that Fancy would die and that she would live had been modified on reflection. Susan held theories about life and work. Before the war she had contended that folks were called when their work was done. A few rotten apples might stick to the tree, but they proved the general rule. Fruit fell to the ground when ripe.

Satisfied in her mind that she would save Fancy by her own undivided efforts, Mrs. Yellam contemplated with grim satisfaction her approaching decease. She regarded herself as dead. She could survey with detachment what was left of the Susan who rose early, waited diligently upon Fancy, ate her meals (without any pleasure in them) and lay down to troubled sleep. So chilled was she in mind, soul and body, that she noticed without regret that Solomon, the faithful Solomon, too affectionate, too demonstrative to a hard old flint, had transferred his allegiance to Fancy. The dog lay at the foot of her bed night and day. Fancy talked to him about Alfred, not about Lizzie Alfreda, because Solomon was jealous. When Lizzie Alfreda came in, Solomon went for a run in the garden, and heartened himself up by sniffing at various food-stuffs in a delightful state of decomposition. But, oddly enough, he never wandered farther afield. Within half an hour—Lizzie Alfreda's visits were drastically curtailed—he would patter up the wooden stairs, scratch at the door, whine, and be admitted. In a jiffy he was on the bed again, staring hard at Fancy, as if he were a doctor contemplating a change of treatment.

It had been agreed between Hamlin and Mrs. Yellam that Alfred's death should be kept a secret from the villagers till the official notification appeared in the news-

papers. But when Uncle walked into the cottage at tea-time, full of cheer despite the weather, and cracking many small jokes about boats and swimmers, Mrs. Yellam simply could not bear it. She said with startling abruptness:

"Habakkuk, I'd break bad news to 'ee gently, if I could. But 'tisn't in me to do it. Alferd be dead."

Poor Uncle could not take it in.

"But, Susan, Alferd be lost."

"'Twas a shell. They couldn't find 'un, because there was nothing to find."

To her dismay, Uncle bowed his head upon his hands and wept like a woman, shedding the copious tears that might have softened the hard eyes steadily regarding him. He had loved Alfred. Susan knew this. He could have better spared one of his own sons rather than this kindly, affectionate nephew. She rose quietly and fetched the letter, giving him time to recover his self-control. As she held out the letter, he raised a face to hers so seamed by grief and pain that almost, almost her heart melted within her. He read the letter and returned it. She put it away, and took a chair upon the other side of the hearth. Uncle gazed about him, noting, as men do upon such occasions, trifles that escape notice in happier times. The coffin stools stood in their old place against the wall. Uncle pointed at them, with trembling finger:

"Fancy be dead, too."

"No. She be more like herself to-day, although tarr'ble weak. They stools be for me, Habakkuk. The sooner I goes the better."

No inflection of resignation tempered this statement.

Uncle, like Hamlin, realised the futility of condolence, but silence imposed too great a burden upon him.

"You has the baby," he suggested.

"She belongs to Fancy. I bain't afeard for they two."

"Be you afeard for yourself, Susan?"

She eyed him, sensible of an ever-increasing aversion to questions. Was he thinking of punishment hereafter, of Hell's fires?

"I bain't afeard o' Hell, and I bain't going to Heaven. For why? Heaven and Hell be here on earth—and nowheres else."

"Susan——!"

"Ay, you be mazed, and no wonder. But I be come to that. I believed in God A'mighty; I believed in Satan—for sixty long years. But such belief be clean gone."

"You be wrong, Susan. It ain't in me to argufy wi' 'ee, and, maybe, tear both our hearts. But you be wrong. The swallers knows better'n that. Who gave 'em their wisdom? I says no more but this: God sent His Own People into the wilderness, where you be, and He brought 'em out."

She shook her head. Uncle stood up.

"'Tis rainin' crool hard, but I be off to the Forest. You won't want Jane fussin' about 'ee? No. Or anybody else. I allers allowed as misery loved company, but I be so miserable this day that I wants to be alone, as you does."

He kissed her cold cheeks and went out into the rain.

She sat on for a minute, but the thought that worried her most was the regret that he had not had his tea. The day was failing fast. In a moment she would have to light a lamp and carry it upstairs. But something remained to be done, a duty neglected since the morning.

She went into the parlour, where the light was better, but not good; good enough, she reflected, for her purpose. She lifted the Bible, placed it upon the middle table, and opened it at the fly-leaf. Then she took pen and ink from her desk and a clean sheet of blotting-paper. She took out her spectacles, wiped them carefully, put them on, and sat down. Against Alfred's name she made the necessary entry, *"Killed in Action,"* adding the date. Her hand never trembled; the writing was characteristic; firm, bold, with the words neatly spaced, indicating love of order. What she had willed herself to be, she was: a flint embedded in sterile soil. She took off her spectacles and placed them in their case, rising as she did so. Upon second thoughts, she decided to let the ink dry upon the page. Suddenly, an irresistible impulse gripped her. She glanced about her furtively, defiantly, as if challenging unseen powers to thwart her determination. Hastily with fingers that trembled this time, she snatched up the pen, dipped it into the ink, and wrote against her name, Susan Yellam, these words:

"Died. December 28th, 1916."

As hastily, she placed the sheet of blotting-paper above the entries, closed the Bible, and replaced it upon its table.

Having shut up the parlour, she lit a lamp and carried it upstairs. The baby was asleep. The nurse went home for the night. Then Mrs. Yellam told Fancy, in a cheerful voice, that she would bring up tea in a few minutes.

"I thought I heard Uncle," said Fancy.

"Yes; he looked in and made some stupid jokes, he did, about gettin' the miller's boat."

"Whatever for?"

"Like as not we may be on an island afore nightfall."

Fancy smiled.

"I'd love to ride in miller's boat again. Alfred popped the question in that. I did tease him first. 'Twas rare fun. I suppose Uncle was in fine fettle, as usual?"

"Yes; I never seen him so gay and joyous. Now, you lie so quiet as any mouse whilst I gets tea."

It might have been so delightful a meal. Outside, the wind roared and the rain fell in sheets; inside, the logs crackled in the fireplace, the warm curtains were drawn, and the lamp shone upon Mrs. Yellam's best tea-things. Everything that could tempt a capricious appetite was there: fragrant tea, cream, jam, honey, and little scones which warranted the belief that Susan Yellam had secreted somewhere a bag of white flour.

Susan had to sustain the burden of talk, and soared to heights. Fancy must be entertained—the doctor's injunction. The old woman's amazing will surmounted all obstacles. And who shall say that this heart-breaking effort to beguile Fancy was not the most selfless achievement of Mrs. Yellam's long life? She described passages in Uncle's early career; anecdotes about Jane, anecdotes about her own Lizzie and Alfred. As a boy, it seemed, Alfred had been very untidy. He never kept his own little attic in order. Finally his mother said to him:

"Alferd, your room bain't a boy's room, nor a dog's kennel, nor a pig's stye. 'Tis the habitation of a lunatic."

Fancy smiled, because the mother must have spoken at the time, and again now, with such inimitable seriousness.

After tea, Fancy was commanded to rest. But before

doing so, she caught hold of her entertainer's hand, and said earnestly:

"How good you are to me, Mother! How good and kind you always are to sick folk. Such a wondersome woman! I hope my lil' maid will grow up just like you."

"If you talk such outrageous nonsense, I'll—I'll spank Lizzie. That'll larn 'ee."

But Fancy refused to be gagged. She went on, in her soft, feeble tones, expatiating upon Mrs. Yellam's many virtues and excellencies. Time was when Susan would have listened to this praise with smug complacency. Fancy did but state the facts. And the mere recital of them exasperated the listener beyond endurance. Steel striking flint—and praise had become steel—provoked sparks.

"I be real vexed wi' 'ee, Fancy."

She bustled off with the tea-things, and remained absent so long that Fancy began to fear that she had really offended her. Solomon, however, reassured her on this point. They exchanged pleasant chat about Alfred. Fancy felt jealous because Solomon would know when Alfred was coming at least five minutes before she did.

"You'll jump off the bed and bark."

Solomon wagged his tail.

"My! Won't he get wet if he comes to-night, Solly? Are you expecting him to-night, you wise little dog?"

Solomon put a cold nose into her hand. Mrs. Yellam's step was heard on the stairs. Solomon retired to his end of the bed, well aware that prolonged talk had been forbidden after tea.

Mrs. Yellam, seeing that Fancy was awake, said impressively:

"We be an island at this minute."

"Oh, dear!"

Mrs. Yellam assured her that it had often happened before. The cottage itself stood high above the encroaching waters. At highest flood they were not more than two feet deep.

"Alfred'll get so wet."

"Ay. I never thought o' that. I think, Fancy, that you did ought to put this strange notion of Alferd's coming out of your dear lil' head. 'Tis most onlikely. I dunno' how such a queer idea got into it."

"Because he promised me that he would come."

"But, Lard bless 'ee, he meant so be as he got leave. If 'tis true that he be safe in France——"

"I know he be safe."

Mrs. Yellam glanced at her anxiously. Was the girl light-headed? She must know that if Alfred were missing, owing—as Fancy had been discreetly told—to some injury to his head which had caused him to stray from the British lines, his first steps, when he became himself again, would be directed back to his battalion. Wisely, she busied herself about the room, entreating her patient to compose herself to sleep. Presently Fancy dozed off, and Mrs. Yellam, softly approaching the bed, examined her critically. She looked startlingly pretty. A faint colour tinged lips and cheeks; her skin was translucently clear; her hair, regularly brushed by Mrs. Yellam, lay thick and lustrous above her forehead.

It was almost impossible to behold her as a widow.

For the first time since she had dedicated all her energies to fighting for this frail life doubt assailed Mrs. Yellam. Fancy's hand lay upon the white counterpane.

Mrs. Yellam laid her hand beside it and compared the two.

All her experience of life as it is lived by people who cannot afford servants, the endless bondage to manual labour, the washing, scrubbing of floors and pots and pans, the cooking, the mending, rose up in her ample mind, and filled it with poignant misgiving. Could this attenuated hand, soft and weak as a child's, fend for Lizzie if—if Death came at the despairing call of Susan Yellam?

She clenched her own hand, nearly as large and powerful as a man's fist. Fancy *must* live to mother her child. She had no claim on Death, this young, pretty creature, so easily pleased with life, so happy with simple things, so contented with what she possessed, incapable of envying those above her in station. Time would be kind to her. Time would enshrine Alfred in her heart as the man who had taught her to love, who had given her a fidelity and tenderness rarely found in cottages or palaces. She might marry again. Why not? It says much for Susan Yellam's essential wisdom that she could visualise such a possibility, however remote, without a pang.

A couple of hours passed.

Lizzie Alfreda was fed and washed, with Fancy looking on, and replaced in her cradle. Mrs. Yellam mended the fire, and went down to the kitchen to prepare supper. Fancy seemed to be refreshed after her nap, but some inflection of her voice warned an obstinate old woman that strength was departing, very slowly, almost imperceptibly, as the hour-hand moves round the dial.

After supper she took her knitting and sat by the bed. To her great relief, Fancy never mentioned Alfred. She prattled artlessly about Lizzie. And then, gradually,

during the intermittancies of silence, Mrs. Yellam knew that the victory, for which she had fought so desperately, which she had believed to be won, was unachievable. Afterwards, she was unable to say when this conviction seized her. She admitted, however, to Uncle that she knew because Fancy must have known. And Fancy believed that she was cunningly hiding this knowledge. It leaked from her lips, as she talked about Lizzie Alfreda to her grandmother, conjuring up a picture of youth ministering to age, a picture so vivid, so true to life, that something told Susan Yellam that it must come to pass. Fancy was going. And when her own time came, she would lie in this bed, and Alfred's child would close her eyes. Fancy foreshadowed no such scene. But she spoke of Mrs. Yellam teaching Lizzie Alfreda how to use her needle and instructing her in other domestic tasks. The thought of doing this, of playing mother in her old age, softened indurated tissues, but the original hardness remained. Susan turned desperately for comfort to a flesh-and-blood grandchild; she turned as desperately from any faith in a wise and merciful God.

Outside, the rain went on falling; the wind wailed through the firs where the ospreys found sanctuary on their flight south. Solomon slept comfortably at the foot of the bed. Presently, it became time to prepare Fancy for the night. Face and hands were washed with soap which Mrs. Yellam had never applied to her weather-beaten countenance. Fancy's hair was brushed and plaited in two coils.

"Put on fresh ribands to-night, mother."

What an idea! You be so vain as any twoad."

"Are toads vain? I'd like blue ribands."

Grumblingly, Mrs. Yellam went to a drawer and pro-

duced new ribands. When she had finished her patient's toilet, she said:

"My! But you look pretty to-night."

"Do I? I'm glad of that."

Lizzie Alfreda woke up, clamouring for Frisian-Holstein milk. She lay beside Fancy till the bottle was finished. Then she was taken back to her cradle in the next room.

It was fully time now for Mrs. Yellam to prepare for the night, but she didn't do so. Fancy had closed her eyes. The faint colour had gone from her cheeks. She had fallen asleep. Susan laid her finger upon the pulse; she could just feel it beating, but not regularly. A wild impulse surged through her to rush into the night, to send Uncle for the doctor. But she dared not leave her patient. And, after all, there was so little change; the child had talked too much after tea; strength would return in the morning.

She made up the fire again, slipped off her austere black gown, and put on a dressing-gown, an ancient garment known to many mothers in Nether-Applewhite. Draped in this, with list sandals on her feet, you might have taken Susan for a Roman matron. Hamlin, who had seen her thus arrayed, nearly addressed her as "Cornelia."

An hour or more may have passed, during which time the gale began to rage itself out. Lulls succeeded roaring blasts. Mrs. Yellam felt no inclination to sleep; she became, instead, sensible of alertness, a quickening of sensibilities and senses. Her hearing, still acute, became painfully so. The patter of the rain upon the windows irritated her; when it stopped, she missed it, and wanted it to begin again.

And then a strange thing happened, strange only when taken in connection with what followed. Solomon woke up, jumped lightly from the bed, and went to the door. He had been let out, as usual, some two hours previously. Mrs. Yellam held up a finger, enjoining silence. Solomon lay down, head up, staring at the door, alert, as Mrs. Yellam was, expectant, with ears cocked as if he heard something or somebody.

"What is it, Solly?" she whispered.

He paid no attention.

If the cottage had not been surrounded by water, Mrs. Yellam might have considered the probability of tramps trying to find shelter in the barn. She would not have been alarmed. Her cottage was tramp-proof and at this moment an island fortress. At the same time, she knew that her heart was beating faster; an indefinable fear assailed her, something she had never experienced before.

She started violently. Fancy was sitting up in bed, her cheeks flushed with colour, her eyes dancing, her arms outstretched.

"I hear him," she exclaimed. "Don't you, Mother?"

"Lie down, child; lie down."

"It's Alfred. Let him in!"

Mrs. Yellam did not move. Fancy, she decided, was light-headed. She hesitated, fearing to excite her, willing to humour her, provided she made no attempt to leave her bed.

"He's coming upstairs."

She no longer looked at Mrs. Yellam; her eyes remained upon the bedroom door. So strange a light shone in those eyes that Mrs. Yellam began to question her own sanity, not Fancy's.

Solomon never moved.

The suspense became unendurable. But Mrs. Yellam remained in her chair, ready to spring to her feet, if Fancy left the bed.

Solomon got up, whined, turned from the door, and jumped into Mrs. Yellam's lap. He was trembling. At the same moment she heard Fancy's voice, strong and exultant:

"Alfie!—I knew you'd come."

Her speech became broken and faltering:

"I did want you, as never was. It was awful going through it without you. And it's a She—what you wanted. How lovely you look! Kiss me again! Hold me tight! If you don't, I—I may slip off. . . ."

Her voice died away in sighs; her eyes closed; her head fell back upon her pillow. Mrs. Yellam put Solomon down, rose to her feet, and hurried to the bed. In an instant her strong arms were encircling the wasted body, clutching it to her, trying to hold Fancy back, but knowing that she was, as she said, slipping away. Fancy spoke again, very faintly:

"However did you manage to come back?"

Mrs. Yellam listened, waiting, hoping, and almost believing, that an answer would be forthcoming. Her son, according to Colonel Tring, had been killed by a shell—killed and obliterated. She had known that death must have been painless.

Fancy answered for Alfred, in a whisper that seemed to come from an immense distance.

"I hear you, plain as plain. What? A—*shell*—*!* Did it hurt, Alfie? It didn't. But because of that you were able to come. You had to come for both our sakes —Mother's and mine. And such a night! You ain't a

bit wet, neither. . . . Afraid, Alfie . . .? With you holding me tight as tight . . . Oh, no."

Susan Yellam heard a trickle of laughter. After that Fancy sighed twice, and then her small body relaxed.

She had slipped away.

. . . . . .

Dawn was stealing into the kitchen when Mrs. Yellam went downstairs.

She was still curiously alert in mind, although very weary in body. After she had closed Fancy's eyes and performed the last services, she sat down by the bed to think. Dying people, as she knew, might entertain hallucinations. And Fancy, in health, exercised a lively imagination. That she should believe that she *saw* Alfred, so long and ardently desired, just before breath left her body, was not remarkable in itself.

But, speaking for Alfred, repeating, as it were, information, Fancy had used the word "shell."

Was this mere coincidence?

Again, according to Alfred—admitting that he had come back—his return in the spirit was due not only to solicitude for his wife, but for his mother. She heard Fancy's feeble voice—"for both our sakes." And she had spoken of his appearance as "lovely."

Susan Yellam's strong brain considered these three facts together with the uncanny behaviour of Solomon, now peacefully asleep in the next room. As yet, she had shed no tears, but, slowly, the ice about her heart was melting.

Her thoughts turned to the form beneath the spotless sheet. It seemed so cruel that Fancy should be dead. Why was life given to young things and then taken

away? But this gentle creature had not lived in vain. She had accomplished a task that had baffled Jane Mucklow and herself. Fancy had drawn Habakkuk from the ale-house, beguiled him from his cronies with soft words and smiles, made a better man of him. She had made a better man of Alfred.

She thought of Alfred and Fancy together.

Almost she believed that Alfred had come back.

Hovering upon the brink of this conviction, she heard a wail from the baby, the pitiful appeal of helplessness to strength. She hurried into the next room, and took the child into her arms, clutching it to her bosom.

Lizzie Alfreda was hers, her very own. Till that moment she had regarded the tiny creature, not with indifference, but apathetically, a grandchild by whom she would do her duty. And we know that she had forced herself to believe that Fancy would live to fend for her own child. Could so frail a woman have done so properly? If her wish had been granted, if Death had taken Susan instead of Fancy Yellam, and if Fancy had risen from her bed an enfeebled, anæmic woman, subject to all those maladies which wait on physical debility, could she have "fended" for Lizzie Alfreda?

The ice was melting fast now.

She fed Lizzie Alfreda and replaced her in the cradle, but the baby still wailed a little, staring at Susan Yellam. She took her up—an action against her principles—soothed her, and immediately the child stopped crying. Susan crooned to her a lullaby which she thought she had forgotten, which had served, long ago, when her own Lizzie was wakeful. And the simple, droning song brought back, vividly, past pleasures. Age dropped from her; she became for a moment a young mother anticipating

joyously all that "fending" implied. Soon the child slept.

And then the tears came, washing away ice, doubt, despair, cleansing anew a humble and contrite heart.

From that undiscovered country, whose existence she had obstinately denied, a traveller had returned.

After lighting the kitchen fire, Susan Yellam entered the parlour. She pulled up the blinds and drew the curtains. From her desk, she took a sharp penknife, and tried its edge upon her thumb. Then, reluctantly, as if ashamed, she opened the Bible, intending to erase carefully the last presumptuous entry.

She glanced at it, and a sharp exclamation escaped her trembling lips. She put on her spectacles and stared, open-mouthed, at the page in front of her. "Died, December 28th, 1916," was written not, as she had supposed, against the name of Susan Yellam, but against the name of Fancy Yellam.

And then she remembered that, in her blind haste to record her own death, she had forgotten to put on her spectacles.

And the light, at the time, was failing.

The Light was not failing now.

She fell upon her knees, bowing her head over the Book.

Next Sunday she was in her pew.

THE END